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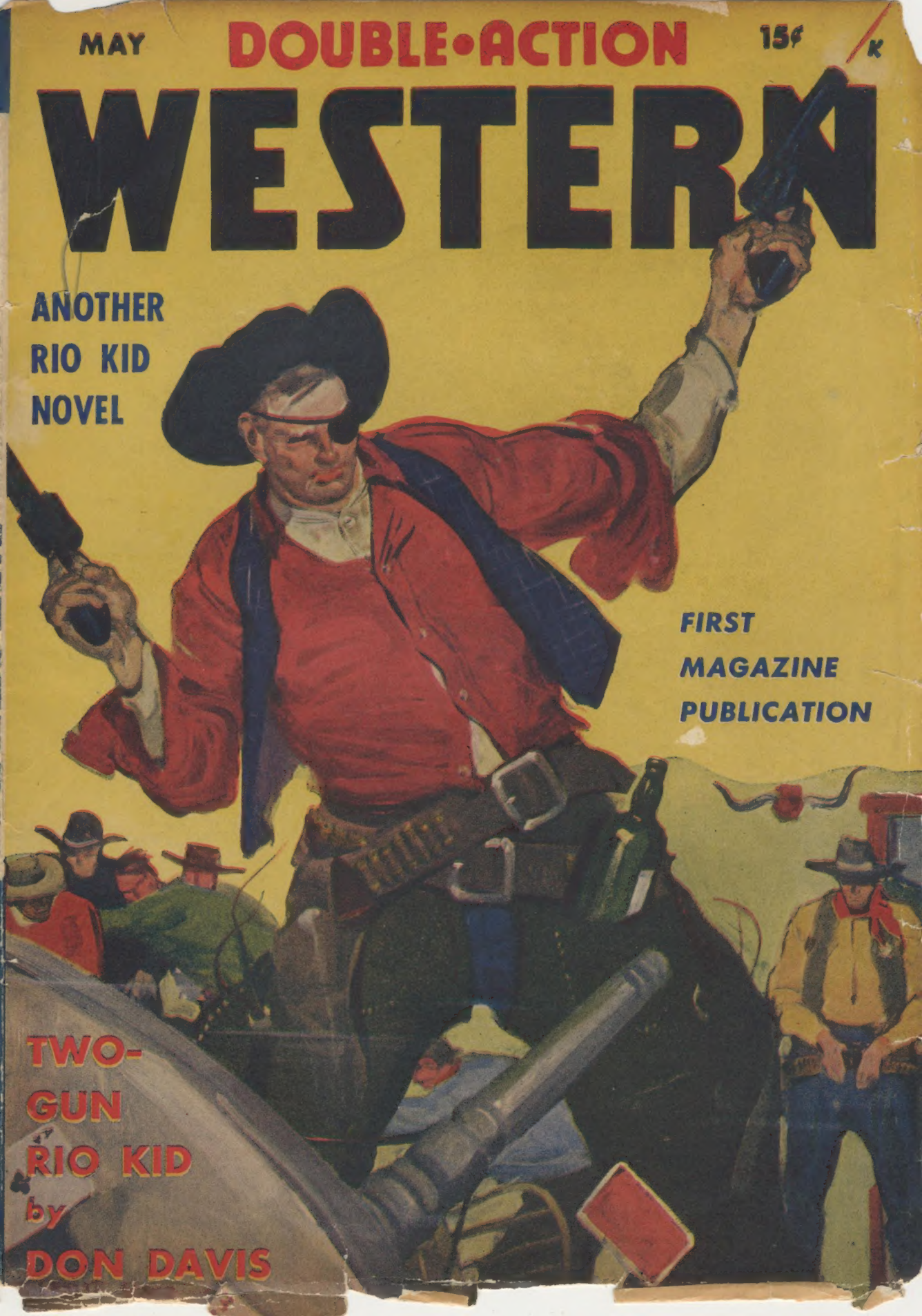

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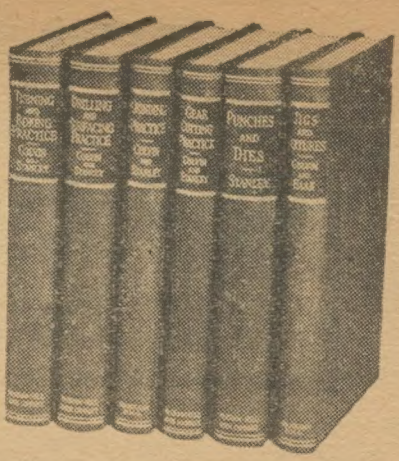

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ANOTHER RIO KID NOVEL

TWO GUN RIO KID ..... **By Don Davis** 10

For three years the Rio Kid roamed the country, unjustly accused of murder and branded an outlaw . . . Upon returning home, to clear his name, the Kid finds the same hate brand hanging over his sister and finds himself again on the spot for another murder . . . .

THREE QUICK TRIGGER SHORT STORIES

LAWMAN'S GUNSMOKE GOODBYE ..... **By Brett Austin** 74

Mike Hunter, grizzled gundog of Limas town, knew that he must give his star to a younger man. But he didn't know that Brett Sneed and his gun-wolf pack were planning to celebrate his funeral with powdersmoke and bank robbery.

LEAD SLUGS FOR GOLD THIEVES ..... **By J. Lane Linklater** 82

Because young Frank Henson handed over his gold claim to Musset's killers without a fight, men said that he was yellow. But that was before Bill Ogden and his daughter gave the younker something that could be repaid only in the hot coin of his flaming guns.

A NOOSE OF GOLDEN DOLLARS ..... **By Carleton Carr** 93

The lynch mob was ready to blast the jail wide open, and Sheriff Matt Stevens had to decide fast. On one hand was his job, his girl, and perhaps his life. On the other was a drunken wastrel with the stain of murder on his hands!

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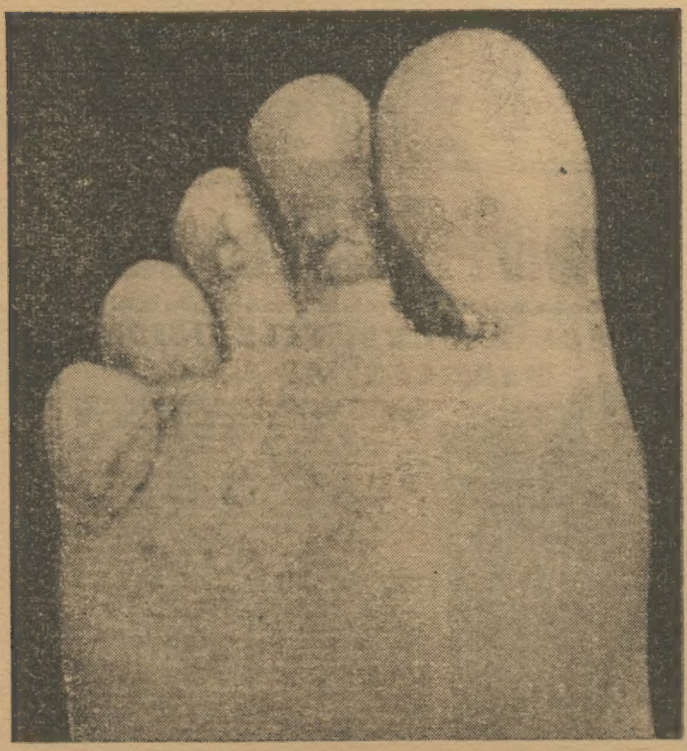

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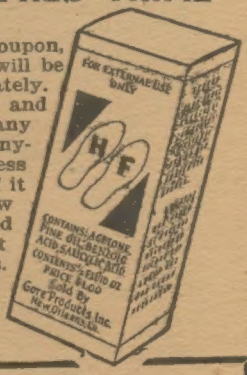

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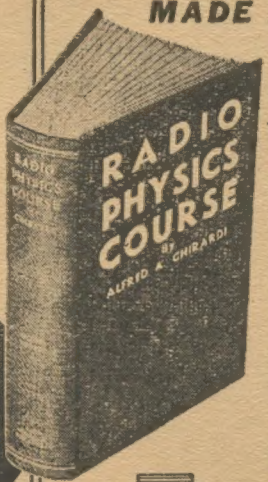

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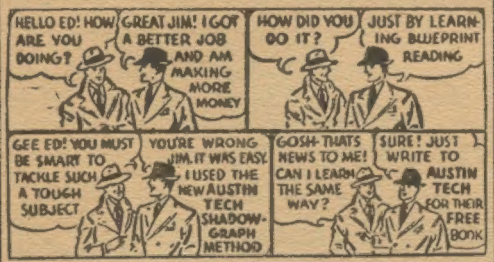
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Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments which give you valuable practical experience. My 50-50 method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Broadcasting Stations employ N. R. I. trained Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other capacities and pay well.

Set Servicing pays many N. R. I. trained Radio Technicians $30 $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 extra a week in spare time.

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J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 2EA2
National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

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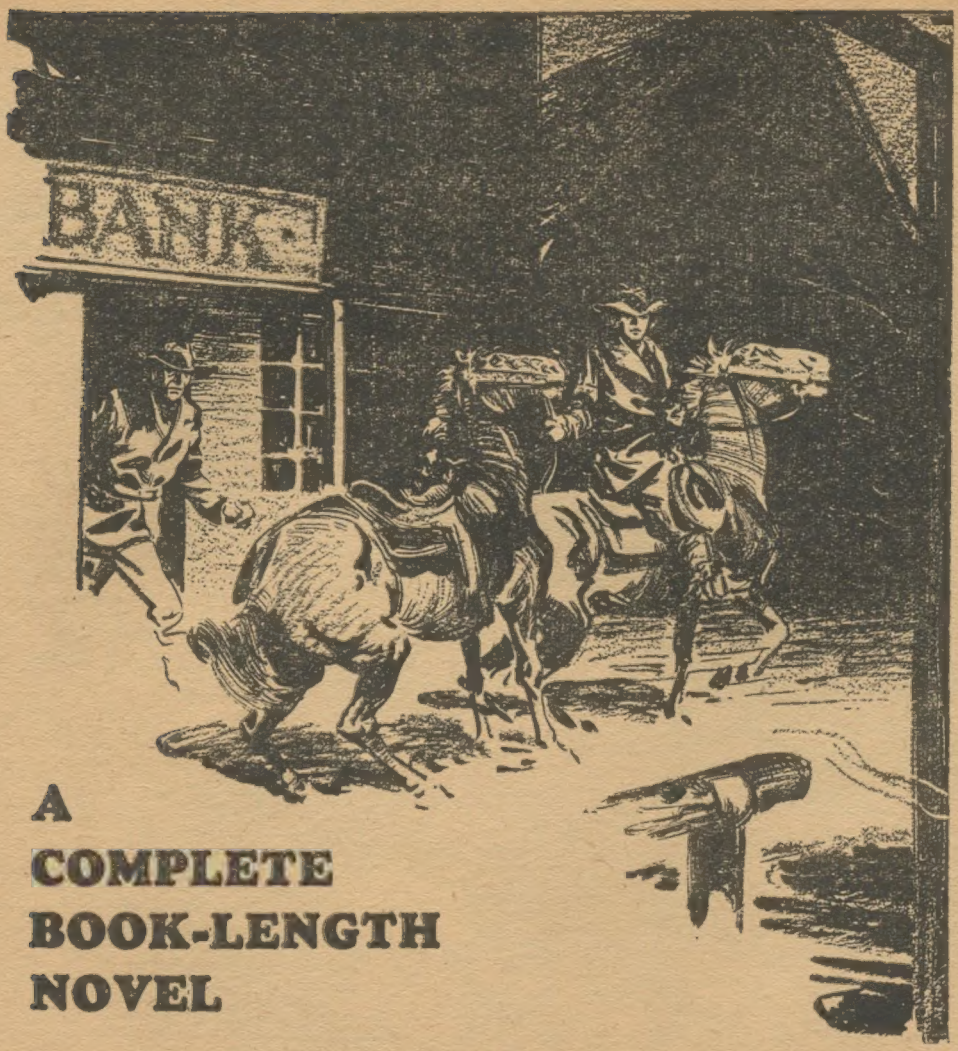

A
COMPLETE
BOOK-LENGTH
NOVEL

TWO-GUN RIO KID

(FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION)

by DON DAVIS

CHAPTER I

THE SOMNOLENT quiet of mid-afternoon gripped the little Arizona cowtown of Chapparell. Under the fierce rays of the Border sun the alkali dust of Main Street was undisturbed by any moving thing. Two saddled horses switched lethargic tails at buzzing sandflies at the hitchrack in front of the Palace Saloon, and at the south end of the business block a freighter's outfit was pulled up in front of the Star Mercantile Company.

The appearance of a single rider from

KID NOVEL

They came charging out of the doorway, their guns roaring.

For three years the Rio Kid roamed the country, unjustly accused of murder and branded an outlaw. . . . Upon returning home, to clear his name, the Kid finds the same hate brand hanging over his sister and finds himself again on the spot for another murder.

the north was hardly a disturbing element in the hushed serenity of mid-afternoon. The shaggy little roan cowpony ambled along at a jog-trot that scarcely disturbed the fetlock-deep dust. The stocky figure of his rider was slumped at ease in the heavy stock saddle, with eyes half-closed against the sun-glare, both hands resting in front of him on the saddlehorn. He rode with the slack reins of one whose horse knew the way well and needed no guidance. He was a smooth-shaven, placid-

faced young man, clothed in worn and dusty range apparel, his complexion burned a dull bronze by the Arizona sun, shaggy red eyebrows bleached several shades lighter than a lock of sorrel hair escaping from under the sweatband of his Stetson.

Just as there was nothing remarkable about Charlie Barnes' appearance, there was no surface indication that this day was to be different from any one of a thousand uneventful days in the routine of Chapparell's existence. Once a week for years Charlie Barnes had jogged into town in mid-afternoon from his small spread ten miles north to buy a few needed groceries, and discuss range conditions and the market price of beef with old Frank Hess who ran the General Store. Once a week for years, precisely at sundown Charlie had remounted his roan and headed north again for his lonely bachelor cabin nestled in the lower foothills of the Wasatch range.

Today, the routine was to be varied. A stone was to be cast into the placid shining surface of the town's monotony, shattering the calm of the countryside into ever-widening ripples that would swiftly expand to engulf many other lives in a vicious maelstrom of seething passions and roaring guns.

Charlie was wholly without any premonition of what was in store for him when the roan nosed up to the rusty iron rail in front of the General Store and postoffice. He stepped out of the saddle and looped a rein over the rail, then stepped up on the boardwalk and entered the store.

The interior of the store was dimly lighted and as hot as a baking oven from the sun's rays radiated downward from a corrugated iron roof. Frank Hess was in his customary rocking chair in a little niche back of the tarnished grille that set the postoffice off from the rest of the store. He looked up at Charlie's entrance, spat a thin stream of tobacco juice expertly into a tin bucket half-full of sand, and said, "Howdy, Charlie," without moving his chair.

Charlie said, "Howdy," in return, and thus far everything was as it had always been. But as Charlie sauntered toward a backless chair set conveniently close to the open cracker barrel he heard Hess' rocker creak, and he blinked his mild blue eyes in surprise when the gnarled shopkeeper arose.

"Never mind gettin' up just yet," he protested. "I'll set a while before I give you my order."

But Frank Hess had moved importantly behind the grillwork and was shuffling through a packet of mail that had arrived by the noon stage. He announced, "You got a letter," and pushed a sealed white rectangle out through the window.

Charlie Barnes hesitated in front of the chair by the cracker barrel. "I reckon there must be some mistake," he protested. "I never get no letters. You know I don't, Frank." He used a tone of mild reproof, as though he suspected the postmaster of trying to force someone else's mail on him.

"Says Charlie Barnes right here on the envelope." Frank Hess peered at the envelope nearsightedly. "From El Paso." He chuckled thinly. "You sure you ain't been writing to one of them matermonial advertisements since Henry Pelham done cut you out with Peggy Aiken?"

Charlie's bronzed complexion took on a deeper hue. At the neck-line of his shirt the color showed a deep red. "In the first place, I ain't admittin' that Pelham has cut me out yet with Peggy. And in the second place you know dang well I ain't mailed no letters out of here to no marriage advertisements."

"From what I hear, Henry Pelham's got the inside track with Peggy, and no mistake. It's a damn shame, too, Charlie, but he's got the get-up and gall that a girl like Peggy likes. Law's sakes, you been courting her for three years and I bet you ain't popped the question yet."

"That," said Charlie Barnes strongly, "ain't neither here nor there." His tone indicated that the discussion of his courtship was ended. He stepped forward two paces and picked up the letter.

Sure enough, it was adressed to "Charlie Barnes, Chapparell, Arizona." He frowned down at it and turned it over uncertainly in his hands, murmuring, "Now who do you reckon'd be writin' me a letter from El Paso?"

Frank Hess hobbled back to his rocking chair. "Best way I know is to open it and find out," he snapped. "That's what most folks does."

CHARLIE leaned one elbow on the counter and scratched an itchy spot behind his right ear. He tore the envelope open carefully and shook out a single folded

sheet of paper. He squinted down at it and moved his lip to form each word as he laboriously read:

Dear Charlie,

I'm in El Paso, heading back to Arizona where I'm going to fight that murder charge I run from three years ago. I never killed Sheriff Edwards, Charlie, and I can prove it if I'm given half a chance. But I want to know how the land lays before I ride into Chapparell again for I can't do much good if they string me up before I can nose around some. So I want you to meet me at the old Bar L headquarters south of town when I ride in. That'll be in about a week, I reckon. I'll wait there for you, and if you can't come please send me some word.

Hugh Aiken

Charlie Barnes stared at the signature a long time after his lips ceased moving. Hugh Aiken! Peggy's brother! The Rio Kid was coming home after three years below the Mexican Border.

From that bold signature on the letter in of him, Charlie lifted his gaze to a fly-specked reward poster conspicuously tacked above the window. He stared hypnotically at the faded picture of a clear-eyed and laughing youth. Below Hugh Aiken's picture, bold black lettering proclaimed: "$10,000 Reward for the Capture of the Rio Kid: Dead or Alive."

For three years that same reward poster had hung there above the postoffice window, a constant reminder to the citizens of the little Border town that one of them had turned killer and renegade, had murdered foully from behind in the night and escaped into Mexico a few jumps in front of an outraged posse.

Since that black night three years ago, meager reports concerning the Rio Kid had drifted back to his home town. The appellation had been hung on him in Border haunts because of his extreme youth and a fancied resemblance to Billy the Kid whose gun exploits were still fresh in the memories of Western desperadoes.

After crossing the Border the Rio Kid had been forced to kill again and again, though nevermore was he accused of throwing down on an opponent from behind. As his reputation grew, so had his list of victims, for there were always those eager to gain the notoriety that would come to the man who beat the Rio Kid to the draw; and the legend of his gun-prowess had grown by leaps and bounds until it was impossible to determine where fact ended and fancy began.

Yet, to men like Charlie Barnes who had known and loved the young Hugh Aiken whose picture adorned the reward poster, it was difficult to associate the Rio Kid with the laughing youngster who had enlivened the community with his boyish pranks. Reckless and wild he had been, hard-riding and hot-tempered, with an avid zest for life that had led him into many minor brushes with the law, but certainly without any of the earmarks of one who would turn into a coldblooded killer such as the Rio Kid was reputed to be.

Charlie Barnes' troubled gaze dropped back to the letter in his hand. He drew in a deep sighing breath, and got a bandanna from his hip pocket to mop beads of sweat from his broad face.

Frank Hess' high, cackling laughter brought him back to the present with a jerk. "I can read the signs, I reckon. A-sweating and a-sighing over your letter, hey? Don't try to fool an old man, Charlie. You ain't got nothing to be ashamed of. It ain't fitten for a man to live alone, and there ain't no spare heifers in these parts, so why shouldn't you get one from El Paso?"

Charlie shook his head, avoiding Hess' bright inquisitive gaze. "It ain't what you think," he mumbled. "It ain't from a gal a-tall."

A SHADOW darkened the outer doorway, and Charlie turned to see Les Edwards enter the store. He wore a white Stetson tilted rakishly over his left eye and a bright silk scarf was knotted loosely about his neck. He had thin, hawk-like features that always tried to be arrogant and always failed because he hadn't enough chin to back up the pose. There was a burnished silver star pinned to his open cowhide vest, and the carved ivory butt of a silver-inlaid .45 swaggered low on his hip in an open holster. It was the same gun that had been found in his father's holster, fully loaded, that night when Sheriff Edwards had been shot through the back and Hugh Aiken's gun was found in the trail a short distance away, with one damning empty cartridge in the chamber.

Les Edwards was just turned eighteen when his father was killed. He was the only support of a widowed mother, and the county had made the gesture of appointing the young man sheriff to succeed the murdered man, and in that frontier community, where the law mostly didn't interfere with a man's private affairs, he had filled the position satisfactorily for three years.

Les Edwards nodded to Charlie and said, "Howdy, Frank." His voice that had been whiny when he was younger was now grating and harsh, though, like his face, it lacked something of the domineering quality he tried to put into it.

Hess said, "Howdy," and his old eyes shifted from the high crown of the young sheriff's new hat to the bright scarf about his neck. "Looks like you're going sparking," he suggested.

Edwards' laughter held the hint of a leer. "Just come from the Bar L. There's a right nice new piece of she-stuff just come across from Mexico with the last batch of hands Henry got in." He winked obscenely and settled himself in the chair by the cracker barrel. "She ain't but sixteen an' don't savvy much, but I calc'late she'll catch onto American ways quick . . . with me teachin' her," he ended modestly.

Frank Hess chuckled with only moderate gusto. "Better watch your step around them Mex gals. Some of 'em pack knives in their garters."

"I won't worry none," Edwards smirked. "First thing I do is take their garters off—then they ain't got no place to carry their knives." He laughed aloud and smacked his thigh at his own wit.

"Charlie, here, ought to take some lessons from you on handling the ladies," Hess said. "He's got so doggone hard up for a female that he's dickering with one in El Paso to come out and settle with him."

"That's a damned lie," Charlie choked out. He crumpled the Rio Kid's letter nervously in his hand.

"Lookit him blush," Les Edwards jeered. "Finally give up moonin' over Peggy, huh? I reckon that's usin' sense. Henry Pelham's got the inside track with her. When I left the Bar L he was gettin' ready to ride over an' visit Peggy."

Charlie clamped his lips together tightly and said nothing. He slowly recreased the letter and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. His blue eyes were cold as they rested on the silver star adorning Les Edwards' vest.

"Trouble with Charlie, he ain't got enough gumption," the old storekeeper said. "God knows I hate Henry Pelham's guts but I do got to admit he ain't lacking in push."

"Hate his guts?" Edwards echoed in amazement. He pushed his hat back off his forehead. "Henry Pelham? How-come, Frank? He's what this country has been needin' a long time. All the ranchers hereabouts have got in a rut. In two years since he took over the Bar L he's built up the whoppin'est herd in this part of Arizony. Now that he's started cuttin' hay off the meadow an' stackin' it for winter feed, he'll have fat stuff to ship in the spring while all the rest of the stock hereabouts is half-starved from winter."

FRANK HESS deliberately spat into the tin bucket of sand. "I ain't denying he's smart. Too dang smart if you ask me. He built up a herd in two years awright. Wet-brands and you know it as well as me. You're a hell of a sheriff. Standing up for a man like that."

"You got no proof of that," Edwards protested hoarsely.

"Proof? A day's ride on the Bar L would show half a dozen slickered brands, and you know it as good as me."

"I sure as hell don't know it," Edwards retorted angrily. "Are you forgettin' I'm sheriff? If I saw any slickered brands I'd call him on 'em."

"No, son," said Hess slowly. "I ain't forgetting you're wearing your daddy's star and gun. But I think you've forgot what they mean. When your daddy was alive he didn't make friends with a rustler and close his eyes to what was going on."

"That's a lie. Henry Pelham ain't doin' any rustlin'. I'll bet my star against a plugged nickel you can't prove it."

"Maybe it cain't be proved. But I'd still like to know how he built up a herd so fast."

"He gets a bill of sale with every herd he buys. It ain't his job to check up on where they come from in the first place. If he gets 'em cheap, ain't that smart business? Some of the other ranchers around here might make some money if they'd buy stuff cheap that way."

Frank Hess shook his head sadly. "You got right and wrong all mixed up, son. All I got to say is you're a hell of a sheriff."

"I got the votes last 'lection. I'm enforcin' the law as good as any man could. I can't ride night-herd all over the county every night. If some of the other ranchers would wake up an' hire hands like Henry Pelham does maybe their stuff wouldn't get rustled."

"Gun-hands!" Hess snorted. "Half a dozen tough hombres that ride his fences as much to keep his neighbors out from inside his fences as anything else. He don't need 'em to pertect his stock from rustlers . . . not being in cahoots with the rustlers, he don't."

"You can't prove a damn word of what you're sayin'." Les Edwards got to his feet angrily. He jerked the brim of his white hat down over his eyes and stalked out of the store.

Frank Hess shook his head sadly after him. "John Edwards would turn over in his grave if he knew how Les was disgracing that law-badge of his. It was a bad day for Jelcoe County when Hugh Aiken shot John through the back and skipped across the Border."

Charlie Barnes cleared his throat. He sat down in the chair just vacated by the sheriff. He reached in his shirt pocket for the makings, and the Rio Kid's letter rustled as he drew out a sack of tobacco. He furrowed his forehead as he made a tiny trough out of a cigarette paper and poured it full of flake tobacco.

"I never have believed Hugh killed John Edwards," he said flatly.

"I know you and Hugh was good friends, but that don't change what he did. He was drunk and raising hell, and John rode out to arrest him. Maybe it was a accident, sort of, but that don't change the hole that was in John Edwards' back."

"There weren't any witnesses," Charlie reminded the old storekeeper.

"There were witnesses that saw Hugh ride down the trail where he was killed. His gun was laying there were he got scared and dropped it. You admitted that yourself."

Charlie nodded soberly. He struck a match to the crimped end of his cigarette and drew smoke deeply into his lungs. "It was Hugh's gun, all right." He spoke half to himself, rehashing all those ancient arguments that he had gone over and over three years ago. "But nobody knows what really happened on the trail. Hugh might have accidentally dropped it there. Somebody else might have come along an' gunned the sheriff."

"Then what'd Hugh dodge across the Border for? That showed he was guilty."

"I don't see it that way," Charlie argued. "Maybe he found John Edwards layin' there, an' then later realized he'd lost his gun along the way. He saw how bad it'd look for him an' got scared he couldn't prove he was innocent. You know damn well there wouldn't have been much of a trial if they'd caught him."

"I'll say not. We'd have strung him up quick as you could say Jack Robinson," Hess agreed. "And I don't reckon we'd have made any mistake neither. Look at the killer Hugh turned into. The Rio Kid! Can't tell me he didn't have it in his blood."

"What he became afterward doesn't prove anything either," Charlie argued. "No man rides the owl-hoot trail without havin' his hand called. Hugh was slick with a gun. I know that. But no man'll ever make me believe he gunned John Edwards from behind without lettin' him draw."

"I know you've allus felt that way, mostly on Peggy's account," the old man said soothingly. "She's a sweet girl, and she's had it mighty tough trying to run the ranch alone since Hugh went bad. But, by crimeny, I don't see why you don't buck up to her and pop the question. No girl is gonna wait forever. Henry Pelham's pushing her hard, from what I hear. And he's got a way with women, just like he has with rustled stock. Couldn't blame Peggy none if she up and married him."

"No," Charlie admitted drearily, "I wouldn't blame her none."

"By grabby, you make me sick to my stomach." Hess leaned forward and spat disgustedly. "You don't deserve no girl like Peggy, Charlie Barnes. Go on and marry your widder or whatever from El Paso. That's as good as you got coming."

CHARLIE didn't reply to the old man's outburst. He took a last drag on his wilted cigarette and dropped it to the floor, toed it out. He drew in a deep breath and turned toward the door.

"Wait a minute," Hess called irascibly. "Better leave your chuck-list here with me. I'll have your order ready for you to pick up when you start home."

Charlie kept on going toward the door. There was a new note of urgency in his voice when he called back over his shoulder, "I won't be goin' back today, I reckon. Got me some business out south of town."

Frank Hess stared after him, open-mouthed. Then he slapped his knee and began to chuckle delightedly. The Aiken ranch was south of town. Maybe he'd talked some sense into Charlie's thick head. He hoped so. It'd sure be a crime for a sweet girl like Peggy Aiken to take up with a man like Henry Pelham.

On the boardwalk outside Charlie stopped and looked up and down the street. The hitchracks were gradually filling up now, and he could see small groups of booted men lounging in the shade here and there.

He reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out the Rio Kid's letter, smoothed it out and studied the date. It had been mailed in El Paso six days previously. And in the letter Hugh had said he would arrive in about a week. He was expecting Charlie to meet him at the Bar L headquarters which, three years ago, had been a deserted ranch house well isolated from its neighbors.

Now there were new buildings at the Bar L, and instead of being a deserted spot that would make a perfect meeting place Henry Pelham was employing twice as many riders as any other rancher in the country. He'd have to head Hugh off somehow. There'd be hell to pay if he rode up to the Bar L unsuspectingly and was recognized. That ten-thousand-dollar reward would appeal to the hard-bitten crew of riders that worked for Pelham.

Charlie thrust the letter back into his pocket and beckoned to a lanky man who was just dismounting in front of the store. He said, "Hi, Jim. Do me a favor?"

Jim Lacy said, "Shore, Charlie. You've done me plenty."

"Wish you'd take this list of grub out and drop it at my place as you ride by." Charlie handed his neighbor a short list of staple groceries. "Tell the boys I may not be back two-three days."

"You bet," Jim Lacy agreed heartily, and without any questions.

Charlie Barnes untied his roan and mounted. He rode south along Main Street, lifting his hand and nodding to greetings from loungers along the boardwalk.

CHAPTER II

THREE HUGE cottonwood trees formed a perfect triangle about the four-roomed log house that Jonas Aiken had built to receive his bride a quarter of a century before. From those trees and his initial had come the Triangle A brand that had marked the Aiken stock from that day onward.

Steep wooded slopes rose directly behind the sheltered ranch house, while to the west and south the terrain sloped gently downward to the Mexican Border fifteen miles away.

A mountain spring seeping from the weathered rocks formed a tiny running stream that Jones had laboriously diverted through a stone spring-house and to watering troughs in the corrals, and in his youth and vigor he had utilized the overflow to irrigate a tiny patch of tilled ground that had produced green vegetables for the ranch table, and even flowers to please his wife who had come to him from a Louisiana plantation and who never quite adapted herself to the strange new frontier and the dry searing heat of the Border country.

But that had been many years ago, when there were a dozen hands quartered in the long low bunkhouse beyond the cottonwoods and sleek herds dotted the rich grasslands spreading south and westward.

A white-faced calf lay on its side in a wooden pen beyond the bunkhouse and bawled piteously. It pawed the ground feebly and rolled pleading eyes up at the girl who leaned on the rail fence and watched it suffer.

Peggy Aiken knew the white-faced calf was dying before her eyes. All day she had been watching its struggles, watching it grow weaker while she did what she could, not knowing the nature of the sickness that had struck it down.

Toward noon Peggy had wept when she realized she could do nothing more for the calf. Great tears had rolled silently down her thin cheeks, making the freckles seem to stand out from the tanned background of her complexion. And she had balled her thin, work-scourged fingers into small hard fists and turned angry eyes upward to the sky and addressed scathing invectives to an unjust God above who brought sickness to tiny calves who couldn't fight back, who seemed determined that she

should lose the unequal struggle she was making to keep the small ranch going.

The dying calf was not important in itself. It was a symbol of all that had happened during the past three years. Rains came in the mountains, and to the east and south, freshening her neighbors' ranges while the grass on the Triangle A lay withered and parched, offering little nourishment for the greedy mouths of the stock bearing her brand.

In the winters, packs of marauding gray wolves slunk down from the mountains and invaded the Triangle A pastures, seeming to take a perverse delight in depleting her herds while those of her neighbors went unmolested. And now this strange malady had struck at her new calf-crop. Its effects were confined within the boundaries of her ranch and already more than half of the new Triangle A calves had been stricken.

It seemed to Peggy Aiken that the Triangle A was cursed, had been singled out by the Almighty for every sort of misfortune that could possibly befall a rancher, and she had begun brooding about the unjustness of it, asking herself secretly whether it was a retribution visited upon her for her brother's sin of three years ago.

Still, she refused to admit herself defeated. Within her slender, ill-nourished body the spirit of her pioneering father flamed indomitable.

Now, in mid-afternoon, she leaned against the top rail of the fence with her chin resting on folded forearms, and watched another calf die. Hours ago, she had conquered her weeping, her brief spell of weakness. Now her lips were set in a tight line and her eyes were fatalistic. There were shadows beneath her eyes, and sunken spots in her cheeks gave her face a drawn, haggard appearance. Her body was as slender and as hard-muscled as a boy's, showing no feminine swells of soft flesh beneath her faded blue shirt and tightly belted jeans.

She found herself wondering what effect the strange disease had on the edible qualities of a stricken creature's flesh. If she were only sure it would not be tainted she could butcher this calf before it ceased breathing, and there would be tasty veal on the supper table tonight.

A greedy glint came into her eyes with the thought. Peggy had not tasted fresh meat for months. Her body craved it as a drunkard craves alcohol. Her breath came a little faster as her eyes fixed themselves on the weakening struggles of the calf in front of her. Her hands clenched and unclenched themselves spasmodically.

SHE wasn't quite sane, and in a queer impersonal way she realized her condition. A dry sob came up in her throat and she swallowed it back angrily. She caught herself glancing about furtively, though she knew she was alone and there was no one about to observe her.

Suppose the veal was tainted and she died from eating it. Would that matter so much? No one would know, and she couldn't be pitied. Pity was the only thing she couldn't stand.

Cords stood out on each side of her thin neck. Her eyes were dilated and enormous beneath the shadowing brim of her hat. She stared with hypnotic intensity at the soft throat of the dying animal. One knife slash and it would all be over.

She shivered as though a chill had come to her in the hot Border sunlight, then turned away from the fence and walked deliberately to a small shed. She entered and selected a heavy-bladed knife from several hanging in a series of leather loops nailed to the wall. She touched the ball of her thumb to the keen edge of the blade and received an influx of strength and determination from the contact.

Somehow, the unwholesome thing she planned to do was her challenge to the evil fate that had dogged the Triangle A for three years. She felt light-headed, as though she were floating along as she went back with the knife in her hand.

If *they* (the "*they*" was wholly impersonal and without meaning) were going to kill off her calves by disease, this was the only way she could strike back at *them*. Other ranchers around her butchered a veal whenever the supply of table meat ran low. For over a year Peggy had refrained from such waste. She needed every calf she could raise to ship to market in exchange for precious cash, to pay a little on the mortgage and buy winter feed.

There was a hot glow in Peggy's eyes as she climbed over the top rail and dropped down into the pen beside the dying calf. It was as though the real Peggy Aiken stood off and watched herself do this thing—and clapped her hands and approved.

She dropped to her knees on the sun-

baked ground and grasped the calf's hot damp muzzle firmly in her left hand, twisting the head up to lift the vital jugular vein to her knife.

The sound of a ridden horse dimly penetrated through the barrier that separated her from reality. She shook her head angrily, convinced that her ears were playing tricks and there was really no one coming. It was just another trick of the gods to thwart her again. She stubbornly refused to be tricked, would not turn her head to see if the obtruding sound of hoofs was actuality or her imagination.

She drew the sharp heavy knife firmly across the calf's soft throat, then calmly rocked back on her heels to avoid the spray of red blood that spurted out.

A man's laughter came to her. She lifted her eyes and saw Henry Pelham astride a beautifully marked black and white paint smiling down at the scene over the rail fence. He lifted his hat in a mockingly courtly gesture as her eyes met his. He drawled:

"I'm always being amazed by you, Peggy." His voice was cultivated and rounded, with none of the nasal twang of the native Westerner. He was a strong-bodied, well-fleshed man in his late thirties, with full sensual lips and brown eyes that sometimes had a tawny, animal look. Now they rested upon Peggy with frank admiration.

She rose slowly, holding the bloody dripping knife stiffly outstretched, as though the hand gripping the wooden hilt did not belong to her. "What do you mean by sneaking up on people?" she demanded hotly.

He arched thick black eyebrows at her and laughed delightedly. "I had no intention of sneaking up on you. The fact was, my dear Peggy, you were so intent on your task that you wouldn't have heard me if I'd ridden up shouting."

She hated Henry Pelham for the smooth mockery in his voice, for the smug self-assurance of the man, for his wealth and his possession of fat herds of cattle while hers were gaunted and stricken with this strange malady that was killing off her calf crop; but she hated him most intensely for the realization that he could carelessly order a calf, or a dozen calves, butchered any time he was so minded, and that he would never reach such desperate straits that he would consider the thing he had caught her doing.

She stood slim and defiant before him with the body of the slain calf kicking feebly as its life-blood gurgled out onto the ground, and her dark eyes flamed her hatred at him. Then she lowered her eyes, let the bloody knife fall to the ground, and said listlessly:

"He was dying before my eyes. . . . just as all the rest of my calves are dying. I . . . couldn't stand to watch him die."

"So you ended his suffering?" Pelham's tone was bantering and light. "A strictly feminine reaction. . . . and that's what surprises me, Peggy. You've always tried so hard not to be feminine. More boy than girl. I've wondered. . . . and by heaven I'm delighted to see you reveal a trace of girlish softness."

Peggy didn't reply. She wondered if he guessed what her true intention had been. From his tone she thought it was likely he did. She stooped and picked up the butcher knife, cleansed the blade by stabbing it into the ground. The dead calf stopped kicking and lay still. She turned and went out a gate, walked to the tool shed and replaced the knife in its leather loop on the wall.

Henry Pelham had dismounted when she came to the door. He wore two .45's in low-slung holsters, but even in that section of the country where most men carried no six-shooter, or one at most, his pair did not seem to mark him as either a show-off or a desperado. They were a part of the man, an integral part of his strength and his assurance.

HE dropped the reins of his paint to the ground and strode toward her, turned by her side into the path leading up to the house with an insolent assumption of welcome that was as much a part of him as his low-tied guns.

Peggy creased her lips in a tight line but said nothing. She was suddenly conscious of an apathetic sense of utter desolation. Somehow, the unavailing slaughter of the dying calf was symbolic of all that had happened during the years since her brother had been gone. One more disappointment to add to all the others she had endured. There would be no veal on the table tonight. Her stomach muscles contracted in angry remonstrance against the unfairness of it.

She felt faint and she braced herself against any outward show of weakness. She

stopped at the low front porch in the cool shade of one of the giant cottonwoods and sat down on the edge of the rough boards.

Henry Pelham remained standing in front of her. The mockery had vanished from his eyes. He studied her drawn face gravely and asked, "Things getting worse, Peggy?"

She nodded, cupping her chin in her hands and not looking at him. "That was the thirteenth calf to die that way. I nursed him all morning...."

Henry Pelham said, "You poor kid." His voice was very gentle, but vibrant and strong. He took off his hat and sat beside her.

"It's too much for you, Peggy. Why don't you give up this insane idea of trying to run a ranch with just one old crippled man to help you? You needn't be ashamed to admit you're defeated. You've tried hard enough, God knows. I've stood by and watched, and I haven't interfered because I knew you didn't want help. I've admired your courage and your determination. But the job's too big for you, dear. Let me help. I've wanted to say this for a long time. I'm sure you knew how I felt."

Peggy felt like a vacuum that drank in the rich sureness of his tone. It was blissful to let languor overtake her, to cease resisting, to give up for a little moment to the restful consciousness that the struggle need not go on.

She felt drowsy, and her taut senses were lulled by the enervating heat of the day, the vast silence into which Pelham's voice merged and blended so it was like a soft caress to her jangled nerves.

"I've proved what can be done here by a man who goes at it the right way." Pelham wasn't boasting. He was stating an essential truth. Not arguing a point, his regeneration of the Bar L ranch backed up his implicit faith in himself.

"Your Triangle A is a natural extension of the Bar L. Let my men tear down the boundary fence between them, Peggy. Your place here will make a convenient round-up camp for my"—he corrected himself quickly—"for our riders."

A round-up camp for Bar L riders! The home her father had built with his own hands. The three giant cottonwoods he had set out a quarter of a century before. The little log house where she and Hugh had been born. This yard where they had played together. The corrals and the bunkhouse. The dear, familiar things that were woven into her life.

Well, perhaps so.

"I'll build a new house at the Bar L. Just for you, Peggy. We'll go on our honeymoon while it's being built. To San Francisco....New York. I want to buy you things, Peggy. The things every girl wants. I've never seen you dressed in anything but shirts and pants. I want to see you wearing rich gowns....my wife."

San Francisco and New York. Hotels.... and dining rooms where one could gorge oneself on rare foods. Thick juicy steaks for the ordering. Peggy's starved stomach quivered with the acute misery of imagining.

Henry Pelham was proposing to her. And she was letting him. She hated Henry Pelham. She scourged herself with that reminder, then said faintly, "You mustn't. I don't love you."

"I can teach you to love me." Pelham laughed indulgently. "I'll take my chances on that."

She didn't feel like a girl receiving her first proposal of marriage—as she had always imagined she would feel. She felt nothing. Perhaps that was best.

"You're so alone here, dear. It's not good for you. It isn't natural. You've stayed here alone with only old Hank for company long enough. I haven't told you this before because I didn't want to revive bitter memories, but I promised your brother I would do my best to look after you. That's why...."

"Hugh? You know Hugh?" Peggy lifted her head to face him, her eyes dilated and wondering.

"Quite well. We met in Mexico two years ago. He told me about you.... begged me to look after you."

"How was he? How did he look? What did he say about....everything?" she ended faintly.

Henry Pelham took one of her thin brown hands in his. "He was well. He looked like....the Rio Kid, Peggy. He knows he can never return to Arizona. He worries about you a great deal....about the effect his action had on you when he went away."

"And you were friends?" she asked eagerly.

"Very close friends," Pelham assured her.

"When he learned I was looking for a ranch where I could settle down and try out some theories of my own he suggested the Bar L to me....because it adjoined the Triangle A and he said he'd feel so much better about you if he knew I was close by to see that everything was all right."

Peggy's lips quivered and her eyes were misty. She felt a whimpering of taut nerves inside her, a sudden convulsive softness that shattered all the barriers she had erected between herself and the world since Hugh's disappearance. She let herself be drawn closer to Henry Pelham, and her eyes did not avoid his. He bent his head to kiss her relaxed lips and she did not draw away from him.

A loud "Halloo," jerked them apart and brought Peggy tremulously to her feet. She recognized Charlie Barnes on his shaggy roan, and the mist cleared from her eyes.

She heard Henry Pelham groan and mutter a low word that was probably a curse, but a great gladness filled her heart at sight of Charlie's familiar stocky figure slumped in the saddle as he neared the corrals.

She wondered how much he had seen as he approached, but she steeled herself against embarrassment and went forward to greet him.

CHAPTER III

RIDING THE long dusty road from Chapparell to the Triangle A, Charlie Barnes gave himself over to the soporific effect of hot sunshine and solitude combined with the lulling, rocking-chair motion of his slow-footed roan. He tried not to think about Peggy Aiken, Henry Pelham, and the impending return of the Rio Kid.

For months, Charlie had been refusing to let himself think about Peggy Aiken and Henry Pelham. He had been seeing Peggy less frequently during those months because he felt sure she didn't want to see him. He knew all about the gallant though losing fight Peggy was making to keep the Triangle A going, and in his own stolid, unimaginative way he realized that it had to be a lone fight to the finish.

Peggy was like that. She and Hugh were both like that. They had inherited a tough fiber of stubborn determination from Jonas Aiken; and from the pampered daughter of a Louisiana plantation who had made flowers bloom in the Arizona desert had come a quiet, self-effacing quality of spirit that would not be crushed by adversity, an inner pride that met misfortune with dignity and high-headed courage.

Charlie didn't phrase it in just those words in his mind. He simply knew, intuitively, that Peggy didn't want any pity nor offer of help from him or anyone else. And he knew it was best for her to go on that way as long as she could manage at all. He knew something would happen to Peggy's soul if the time ever came when she was forced to admit defeat.

He suspected that the same thing had happened to Hugh's soul that night when he fled across the Border to escape a lynch rope. That had been Hugh's first admission of defeat; the first time he had faced a situation stronger than his own strength.

In Hugh Aiken's transformation into the renegade Rio Kid, ruthless killer and Border desperado, Charlie had recognized the effects of that one night upon Hugh.

Peggy's present situation was no less serious. If circumstances beyond her control forced her to admit her defeat, Charlie foresaw the same reaction that had overtaken Hugh. Cornered and desperate, the high spirit of conquest would turn into a snarling corrosive bitterness that would inevitably seek to strike back at the forces that had destroyed that spirit.

For months Charlie Barnes had brooded over the possible effect of defeat upon Peggy without seeing any way out. He was in love with her; had loved her with single-minded perseverance for fifteen years. Though he had never put his feeling into words he knew that Peggy did not doubt his love. She knew she had only to turn to him, and that he would always be waiting.

Until today, Charlie had been content to wait because he thought that was the best course. He knew all about her neighbor on the south. He knew Henry Pelham was a frequent visitor at the Triangle A, and he stolidly accepted the rumored reason for Pelham's visits.

Without egotism, he had little doubt that Peggy would turn to him when she was ready for marriage. Henry Pelham was an outsider, a man almost twice her age. He was despised and feared by the other ranchers who saw in him a threat to their

settled way of life. It was inconceivable to Charlie that Peggy would take his courtship seriously.

This letter from Hugh Aiken in his shirt pocket changed everything. The Rio Kid was coming home to fight the murder charge that lay against his name, and Charlie knew that return would bring heartbreak to Peggy if it turned out badly. For three years she had steeled herself to accept the fact of her brother's outlawry, and she never spoke his name. But if he were arrested and made to stand public trial, were convicted and made to pay the penalty for murder at the end of a rope, Charlie knew it would be like imposing the death sentence upon Peggy herself.

He shook his head with a dismal foreboding as he rode through the Triangle A range toward the ranch house in the shelter of the cottonwoods. The ground was powdery dry and the fresh grass was a pale, unhealthy yellow instead of showing bright green. The few head of cows he could see listlessly cropping the dying grass showed ribs through their hides, and sharp hipbones above sunken flanks. Only about half of them were with calves and those were listless, knobby-kneed little creatures who bawled mournfully as they followed their emaciated mothers about.

CHARLIE didn't know what he was going to say to Peggy, hadn't decided whether he should tell her about Hugh's letter or not. He had a vague idea of trying to sound her out, to see whether she would welcome her brother's return or be hurt by it before he ventured to tell her. From the Triangle A he planned to ride on to the Bar L and try to make some excuse for staying around in the vicinity for a few days in the hope of intercepting the Rio Kid before he showed himself to anyone else.

As he neared the sheltered ranch house he recognized Pelham's paint saddle horse standing at the corral fence. This wasn't any surprise, for Les Edwards had said Pelham was riding to see Peggy this afternoon.

Then he saw the two figures sitting together on the front porch. Very close together. It was apparent that they had not seen him, were unaware of his approach. It looked to him as though they were holding hands, as though Peggy was intentionally leaning closer to Pelham.

When Henry bent his head to kiss the girl Charlie loved, Charlie's first emotion was one of stunned disbelief. When Peggy did not immediately jerk away, Charlie felt a hot rush of shame that he should have witnessed the act. Without conscious thought he lifted his voice in a ringing shout to let the couple know they were no longer alone. Peggy's instant response, her confused withdrawal from Pelham, the set look of gladness on her thin face as she came down the path to greet him told Charlie that the scene he had witnessed was not an optical illusion.

He lifted his hat awkwardly and his red hair flamed in the late afternoon sunlight as he reined his roan up beside Pelham's paint. Peggy's "Howdy, Charlie. You're a stranger in these parts," sounded effusive and strained to him. He nodded with constraint and didn't meet her eyes.

Peggy knew, then, that Charlie had seen her let Henry Pelham kiss her lips. She stepped close to him impulsively as he dismounted and said in a quick low voice: "Oh, Charlie. I was never so glad to see anyone."

Grim-lipped, he said, "That so?" without looking at her. He made quite a job of sliding his knotted reins over his mount's head and dropping them to the ground while Peggy waited tensely for him to look at her, to give her a chance to say more.

Then Pelham was sauntering toward them and the moment was lost. Perhaps forever lost, Peggy thought. For when Charlie nodded curtly to Pelham the look of easy-going youth was erased from his smooth face. His features had matured and hardened, and Peggy knew that something was irretrievably lost between them.

Henry Pelham was the only one of the trio wholly at ease. He sauntered forward with a satisfied smile lurking on his full lips. He drawled, "Good evening, Barnes," and linked his arm into Peggy's with a distinct air of proprietorship.

Peggy disengaged her arm from his with a light laugh that rang false in Charlie's ears. "It's hot out here in the sun. Let's all sit on the porch."

Charlie nodded and strode ahead of them toward the porch. He sat down on the end of the boards and tipped his hat forward over his eyes, drew the makings from his pocket and fashioned a cigarette with his stubby fingers.

Peggy sat between the two men and was silent. Her chin was lifted and a pulse throbbed beneath the sun-burned flesh of her throat.

"Peggy's having more bad luck," Pelham told Charlie cheerfully. "Her calves are dying by the dozens for no apparent reason at all."

Charlie said, "That so?" He licked his cigarette and felt in his pocket for a match.

"When I rode over this afternoon she was just putting one out of its misery there in the pen. Worst part of it is she can't even beef them when they're sick that way, eh, Peggy?"

"What?" She turned her head toward him with a startled jerk.

He smiled, showing strong white teeth, but she detected a jeering note in his voice. "I said it wouldn't be so bad if you could just butcher the critters when they get down. That way, you could get a supply of fresh meat anyway."

Peggy looked away from him and didn't reply. He was taunting her, here in front of Charlie. She hated him. What crazy weakness had made her forget her hatred a few moments ago? She set her lips in a straight tight line and stared out over the corrals.

"How are things going with you?" Pelham spoke past her pleasantly to Charlie. "About ready to ship to market?"

Charlie shook his head. Beneath the low-pulled brim of his hat his eyes were fixed on the ground. "Not near ready," he admitted. "Another month yet before they'll have any weight on them. It was a tough winter."

"That so?" Pelham sounded genuinely surprised and regretful. "I shipped a bunch last week. Prime, fat stuff. Gathering another trainload now."

NEITHER Charlie nor Peggy said anything. A rider was coming in from a mountain trail on the north. It was lanky old Hank Greenow. He had been Jonas Aiken's foreman and was now the only rider left on the Triangle A.

"Trouble with all you ranchers hereabouts," said Pelham expansively, "is that you don't keep up with the times. You sit back and hope for the best. If you have a hard winter you curse the luck and let it go at that."

"Yeh," Charlie muttered, "I guess you're right."

"I know I'm right. I've proved it on the Bar L. Nobody could make a go of that ranch until I bought it. Now look at it."

Charlie took a deep drag on his cigarette. He was astonished to see that his fingers were trembling. His voice sounded strange and cold in his own ears:

"Jim Thompson did awright on the Bar L till the rustlers from acrost the Border got to stealin' his stock faster'n he could raise it."

"Sure. That's what I'm saying. So he quits. Gave up. Didn't have gumption enough to protect his own interests."

"Twenty miles of Bar L range lie against the Border." Charlie's voice was harder now. A stubborn anger was driving him on. "It'd take a army to patrol twenty miles of Border against Mex rustlers."

"I'm doing it with half a dozen hands," Pelham scoffed.

Charlie dropped his cigarette and scuffed dirt on it with his boot toe. His hands weren't shaking any more. He pushed his hat back on his forehead and turned to look at Pelham past Peggy. In a remote, quiet tone, he suggested. "I reckon you don't have to patrol that Border no more, Pelham."

Charlie Barnes was unarmed. The man in whose face he flung that challenge wore a .45 on each hip. For a moment the black shadow of impending tragedy hovered over the shaded porch. There seemed to be a slow deadly pulsation in the late afternoon air, as though unseen wings quivered gently above the spreading cottonwoods.

The girl sitting between the two men came erect and tense. She turned and saw something in Henry Pelham's face she had never witnessed before. It was not an outward transformation. His lips still smiled. It was an emanation of evil from within the man. It spread over his features like a dark shadow, terrifying and obscure. His breath came and went harshly between lips that had not ceased smiling. She saw the essence of a secret lust that was stronger and more evil than anything she had ever imagined. The lust to kill. The driving, insensate urge to bring death to another human being. It blackened Henry Pelham's soul as the virus crept through his veins, put a stamp of bestiality upon the handsome features that still smiled.

A sharp pleading cry welled up out of Peggy's throat. She leaned close to Pel-

ham and gripped both his forearms with her hard-muscled fingers. "No," she cried softly. "No, Henry."

The moment passed as suddenly as it had come. Henry Pelham threw back his head and laughed mockingly. "You're right, Barnes. I don't have to patrol the Border any more. They'd be fools to rustle from me."

"You admit it then?" Charlie's voice was uneven, rasping.

"I admit nothing," said Pelham easily. "But in private, just among us....why should I deny it? It's smart business. That's all."

"Crooked business," said Charlie savagely between set teeth.

Pelham chuckled again. "I'm making money on the Bar L while all the rest of you are going deeper in debt with every bad season. Wouldn't hurt you other fellows to learn some tricks from me."

Charlie slouched back with his elbows resting on his knees. He had been a damned fool to push Henry Pelham that way. Getting himself killed wasn't going to help anything—least of all Hugh Aiken, who was depending on him—and Peggy.

He rolled another cigarette, and his fingers shook so badly with spent anger that he tore two papers before he got a bulky cylinder fashioned.

HANK GREENOW had ridden up to the corral and was unsaddling. He was a thin, wire-muscled man, with his left arm cut off above the elbow, result of a tangle with a long-horned steer in his youth. From the porch, Charlie could see a black scowl on the old man's features as he looked at Pelham's saddled horse. Hank was tough and ill-tempered, as ornery as a two-year-old bull in rutting time, but he loved Peggy Aiken and the Triangle A with the passion that only a lonely and embittered old man is capable of, and Charlie shrewdly suspected that Hank refused to leave his job, though many months' back-pay were due him.

Slowly, while he stared at Hank, Charlie said, "I reckon maybe you're right at that, Pelham. I could use some money-makin' tricks on my place awright."

"Sure you could. You've got a nice little spread out there, Barnes." Pelham spoke in an obvious effort to placate the young man whom he had been about to kill five minutes before. "You've got a wide valley there that'd cut hay as good as anything I stack at the Bar L. You could feed through the winter and have your stuff fat for shipping early while the price is up."

"Yep. I sure could, I guess. If I knew anythin' about cuttin' hay an' such."

"Dad always said that'd be the ruination of the range," Peggy blazed out suddenly. "It's against nature. Nesters will come in as soon as you show them the range is good for raising crops. They'll fence off little pieces and cut the range up into bits. Pretty soon they'll crowd the cattle ranchers out."

Henry Pelham laughed indulgently. "Your father was old-fashioned. In his day cattle prices were high and there was no such thing as drought. But we have to keep up with the times."

"By....throwing in with rustlers from across the Border?" Peggy asked with sudden viciousness.

Pelham's answering chuckle was still indulgent. "You don't understand such things, Peggy. Leave them to the men. You shouldn't have to worry your pretty head about ranching. Eh, Barnes?"

"That's right," Charlie muttered in a tone of constraint.

Peggy threw him an appealing glance. "Are you siding with Henry now?"

"I guess maybe I am." Charlie hesitated. "How do you go about cuttin' your hay, Henry?"

"I've been doing it with a scythe, but I've jut gotten in one of those newfangled cutting machines. Tell you what, Barnes. I need a man over at my place to run that machine right now. How'd you like the job? I'll pay you enough so you can well afford to hire an extra hand on your own spread....if there's anything to do over there."

"Why," said Charlie humbly, "that'd be great. But I thought you hired Mexicans for the haying."

He heard Peggy gasp when he accepted Pelham's offer of a job. He was conscious of her reproachful eyes on him, but he doggedly refused to look at her.

"So I do," Pelham agreed readily. "They do all the hand work. Gathering and stacking. But they're no good with any kind of machinery....and my riders are insulted if I order one of them to drive a team. Just got a new bunch of Mexes in," he went on with a malicious undertone of enjoyment. "There's some good-looking girls

with them. No need for you to be lonely while you're working for me. But you'll have to beat Les Edwards' time. He's already been snooping around."

Peggy laid a trembling hand on Charlie's arm. "Don't jump into anything," she pleaded in a hushed voice. "Stay and eat supper...."

Pretending he hadn't heard Peggy, Henry Pelham interrupted curtly, "If you're taking that job you'd better start riding, Barnes. You can just about make the Bar L in time for chuck. Tell the foreman I said to fix you up....and I won't be home till later....if Miss Peggy will invite me to stay to supper with her?"

Peggy waited breathlessly for Charlie to throw Pelham's smug assurance back in his face and tell him to go to the devil. But Charlie only nodded and arose. He said, "You're the boss," and strode off toward his horse.

Peggy watched him go with a queer feeling of unreality fighting against her bitter disappointment in Charlie. The shadows of evening were lengthening, and her gaze followed the stocky figure of Charlie on his shaggy roan until it merged with and disappeared into the late afternoon heat haze. The wistful, questing expression on her thin proud young face went away and was replaced by a hard look of new maturity.

She turned to Henry Pelham and drew in a deep breath. "I'm sorry....that Charlie came along and interrupted. I was just going to tell you....that I'll marry you as soon as you want me to."

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS late at night of the sixth day following the Rio Kid's departure from El Paso. He had covered two hundred and forty miles on his black stallion in those six days. A lot of distance in six days, but Thunderbolt appeared as fresh now as he had been at the beginning of the journey. There was a close communion of spirit between man and rider which communicated the Kid's feeling of urgency to his sleek black mount. It was as though Thunderbolt understood that the Rio Kid was coming home at last, as though the black stallion gave his tacit approval to the venture by the eager untiring pace that had completed the trip in six days instead of seven.

For two hours, now, the road they had traveled had been a familiar one to the Rio Kid. It paralleled the Mexican Border about a mile inside United States territory, following a winding course through the broken foothills of the mountains that rose to the north.

In the faint cool light of a half moon the Kid's eyes picked out remembered landmarks as the road led on toward the old Bar L ranch though the sharp outlines of the terrain were softened and blurred by the shimmering yellow-tinged moon-glow.

The road climbed a long upward slope now, and at the crest of that long slope the Kid knew he would look down upon the range he had ridden many times in his boyhood. The eastern boundary of the Bar L followed the top of the ridge down to the Border, and he recalled every aspect of the old broken-down gateway through which the road passed. In later years the boundary fences of the Bar L had fallen into disrepair, and the old wooden gate always sagged open. The Kid could only vaguely recall Jim Thompson, former owner, who had been driven to give up the ranch because of the depredations of Border rustlers. He could recall his father's indignation at the time, and how they had been forced to ride closer guard on the Triangle A herds after the Bar L became deserted and unstocked, removed as a buffer between the Aiken range and the Border.

Thunderbolt was loping smoothly up to the top of the long ridge now. The Rio Kid drew himself erect in the saddle, his belly muscles tightening, a strange choked feeling in his throat. His gray eyes glistened with an eagerness he had been putting away from him for years, the bleak hardness of his young features relaxed into the lines of youth again.

He had waited long and ridden far for the feel of this moment. He had always sworn he would come back some day, but it was hard to realize that day had actually arrived. Those hard, danger-strewn years on the renegade trail through Mexico were behind him now. The future was rich with promise. His old friends, his sister Peggy, the right to remove his two guns and return once more to the name of Hugh Aiken....

Thunderbolt snorted and swerved to a sharp halt at the top of the rise. Instead of a wooden gate sagging open invitingly

into the Bar L pasture, the moonlight showed latticed iron gates uncompromisingly barring the way.

The Kid frowned at the transformation that had come in his absence. He rode close to the swinging gates and found them padlocked with a heavy chain. They were swung on hinges between high solid posts of oak, and in each direction a new four-strand fence of heavy barbed wire was stretched tightly between heavy cedar posts spaced at short intervals.

The Kid's frown deepened two vertical creases in his forehead. This was a plumb unfriendly way to greet a returning pilgrim. What the hell was the meaning of padlocked iron gates? First time he had ever run across anything like that in the cow country where there always was a warm welcome for a wandering rider.

And across the old Bar L range, too. That was more than strange. It was downright crazy. His gray eyes narrowed to slits, and his hand strayed into his shirt pocket for tobacco sack and a book of papers.

The Bar L range! He had planned to make the old 'dobe ranch house his headquarters while he spied around and got the lay of the land without sticking his head into a noose. He had written Charlie Barnes a letter asking his old friend to meet him there, thinking it would be a safe place for a hideaway.

He felt a tingling in his scalp as he sat motionless on the black stallion in front of the locked iron gates. An instinct of caution that he had learned to obey during these past three years. The feel of danger was there in the night-silence on the lonely ridge-top.

WHAT other changes had taken place since his hasty departure? For three years he had been deluding himself with the belief that things had stood still back home while waiting for his return. In all his imaginings he had come back to find everything just as he had left it.

His lips were cold and tight as he licked the cigarette paper and put the rolled cylinder of tobacco between them. He hesitated with the head of a match against saddle horn for striking. He felt more profoundly alone than he had ever been in his life. Always before an implicit belief in his own future had been a spectral figure that rode by his side along the lonely way. It had been a matter of patience, and he had schooled himself in patience; unswerving determination, which he had never lost; the inward knowledge of his own innocence and the confident assumption that he would some day return to Arizona and prove that he was innocent.

Now he was shaken by a loss of confidence. What had appeared a simple matter in his imaginings began to present all sorts of insuperable difficulties. He had been cut off from all communication with Chapparell for three years. What a fool he had been to think everything would stay as it was until he returned to vindicate himself. He had pushed blithely on from El Paso after writing that letter to Charlie without a care in the world. It had all looked so simple when viewed from afar. Now, faced with a locked gate instead of the sagging neglected fence he had known, the way ahead seemed direfully complex.

If this had happened to the Bar L, how could anyone guess what other sweeping changes had taken place. He felt lost, like a boat adrift on an unknown sea without a compass. What was there he could be sure of now? He didn't even know that Charlie Barnes still lived. He should have waited in El Paso for a reply....

He scratched the match across the horn of his saddle. It made a rasping noise that was loud in the blanket of night silence. The flame that spurted up was unaccountably bright. He cupped his hands over it quickly, ducked his head with a furtive air to put his cigarette into the flame.

By this action he was sharply reminded that he was a fugitive from the lynch rope, a wanted man with a ten-thousand-dollar reward upon his head. He had almost forgotten that during these past weeks since he had crossed the Rio Grande in the Big Bend district of West Texas. True, he had encountered many of the old yellowed reward posters along the way, but he had become contemptuous of them because he had changed so much it was difficult to recognize the Rio Kid from those faded pictures.

It was different here in Arizona, in the shadow of the crime that had driven him across the Border. He would be instantly recognized here. His instinctive cupping of the match flare and hiding his features while he sucked fire into his cigarette

brought the gravity of his danger into vivid focus.

He let the cigarette go out between his lips, threw it to the ground with an angry gesture. Thunderbolt snorted and stamped a foot in the dust. He curved his neck, nuzzled his rider's knee with soft questioning lips.

The Kid leaned forward and patted his satiny neck. He muttered, "Yo're wonderin' what th' hell, Old Timer, ain't you? Wall, so'm I. There's thuh Border a mile south. All I gotta do is foller this here fence. I know the trails on the other side. I've rode 'em before. An' I'm all to once afraid I don't know the trails hereaboots. It'd be awful easy tuh ride into somethin' I couldn't ride out if I go on."

Thunderbolt tossed his head and nickered softly. It seemed to the Kid the stallion was saying, "You know best. I don't like this country either....but whatever you say...."

He let his agile, lean-hipped body slump lower in the saddle while he considered the situation well. If he turned south across the Border now there would be no retracing his steps, ever. He knew that much. He had dared a lot coming this far on the way home. If he turned away now it would be the end of his dreaming.

Yet, better to end it that way than by swinging at the end of a rope. He wondered how Peggy had held up during the three years he had been gone. In the beginning he hadn't let himself think about Peggy. Not outwardly. It had been too painful. They had been very close after their parents died. He knew her pride, and her fierce unyielding loyalty. It couldn't have been easy on her.

WOULD it be best for Peggy if he turned back now? Three years had given the wound time to callous over. Wasn't it likely his return would just reopen the old wound? Was it selfishness that had brought him back to clear his name?

He laughed. A short bitter laugh that echoed away eerily from the wind-swept ridge where he had halted. God knew it would be easier to turn back. He could cross the border and go east to Juarez, across the river from El Paso. A girl named Kitty was waiting for him there. He knew Kitty would be waiting. She wouldn't ask him any questions. Kitty wasn't the sort to ask questions.

A pinprick of light showed westward and a little south, near to the Border. The Rio Kid straightened in the saddle and stared downward from the ridge, unaccountably fascinated. There was someone down there. A night rider lighting a cigarette. A thousand mad fancies rioted through his mind. Charlie Barnes, perhaps. Faithful old Charlie, a day ahead of the hour set by the Kid in his letter. The match flare had showed not more than a quarter of a mile away. He had to restrain an impulse to lift his voice in a shout that would tell Charlie he was there on the ridge.

He didn't know the night-rider was Charlie Barnes. He cursed himself for a fool. It might be anyone else. An enemy who would start shooting the moment he was recognized. The future beyond that locked gate was peopled with enemies. The unknown was a challenge that lured and drew him on. His feeling of utter aloneness increased. If he passed beyond that barrier he would have to turn himself into a skulking figure of the night, afraid to approach any man lest he be recognized.

He wasn't used to skulking. Not even while riding the owl-hoot trail. He had never cringed from meeting any man, had learned dependence upon his guns and his skill in handling them.

But even the Rio Kid's two guns would avail him little here where every man's hand would be against him. The moment he rode down into the Bar L range he would be committing himself to a sneaking course of action. It could not be otherwise.

His black stallion nickered again, and turned his splendid head inquiringly. The Kid asked, "Gettin' tired of standin' here lookin' at that locked gate? Well, so'm I. What the hell they mean by lockin' a gate acrost a road? A man'd think, by God, they didn't want me to ride this way."

Thunderbolt tossed his head and nickered.

The Kid's gray eyes became bleak in the cold moonglow. "Lockin' me outta my own home range, huh?" He slid his hands to the worn butts of guns tied low on his hips, and the cold wood gave back encouragement to him.

He drew his right-hand gun, and lifted the reins from the saddlehorn with his left. He pressed his thighs against Thun-

derbolt's sides and the eager black pranced forward close to the hinged gates.

He leaned from the saddle and turned the padlock so it lay flat against one of the iron bars, pressed the muzzle of his .45 against the small keyhole.

The racketing crash of a single gunshot thundered up the hillside from below and directly ahead. The Rio Kid lifted a strained face to the moonlight and stared down the slope. No other sound came to him. The reverberating echoes drummed away into the distance and were swallowed up by the night.

The Kid's pulse drummed in unison with those resounding echoes. His finger was tight on the trigger, but still he did not increase the slight pressure necessary to blast the gate open.

That shot was a warning that something was going on down there. The moonlit night was no longer a beckoning solitude, but was peopled with unseen wraiths who lit matches and fired shots into the night with no reason at all.

He set his teeth together tightly, and his lips came back from them in a snarl of derision at himself and at his hesitancy. He was getting the jumps—like an old woman.

He pulled the trigger of his .45 and a leaden slug smashed the padlock under the muzzle. Thunderbolt pranced away and snorted. From long force of habit the Rio Kid reloaded the cylinder of his gun before holstering the smoking weapon.

Only silence beyond the fence answered the challenge of his shot.

He reined Thunderbolt forward to the gates again, leaned from the saddle and flipped the chain loose. The gates creaked on their hinges as he rode through. He left them swinging open in defiance of range etiquette, lifted Thunderbolt into a swinging gallop in the direction of the shot he had heard.

There'd be no more question of turning back.

CHAPTER V

WHEN CHARLEY BARNES reached the boundary fence between the Triangle A and Bar L ranches he encountered swinging iron gates fastened shut with a heavy chain and an open padlock looped through two links.

He frowned heavily at the padlock and chain as he passed through into Bar L range. It was the first time he had ridden that way since Henry Pelham took over the ranch. He'd heard rumors of locked gates on the Bar L, but had shrugged and discounted those rumors. Now he decided it was a man's own business if he wanted to padlock the gates to his property.

The sun had disappeared below the western horizon and the beginning coolness of evening came on as Charlie rode toward the cluster of ranch buildings where only a few years before there had been nothing but a single abandoned adobe structure.

Almost immediately after passing through the iron gates a change was noticeable in the range feed along the way. A lush greenness showed in the Bar L pasture, instead of the listless yellow of the Triangle A pasture. It was positively uncanny to see how the wire fence seemed to act as a line of discrimination between an area that had received bounteous rainfall and the parched dryness of Peggy's range. Sleek, contented cattle grazed here, and in the soft twilight of the Arizona evening a serene atmosphere of smug self-satisfaction seemed to be exuded by the land itself.

You couldn't blame Henry Pelham for that, Charlie reflected as he rode along. Whatever the man's sins he certainly possessed no magical power that induced rain to fall on his range while it avoided neighboring ranchers. This was merely another evidence of an unsatisfactory law of nature which Charlie had observed often before: Let a man once hit a streak of bad luck and it appeared that God took a perverse delight in visiting every other form of misfortune upon him.

Right and wrong had nothing to do with it. All the old copybook maxims took a beating when it came to the facts. God didn't frown on wickedness and reward virtue. Not in Arizona, anyway.

As Charlie rode on into the wide flat meadow where Pelham had introduced the startling innovation of cutting hay and stacking it for winter feed, he ceased bothering with abstruse meditations upon the singular ways of the Almighty to let his mind take an active interest in the scene before him.

There was a stretch of rich grassland here, almost a mile wide and several miles long. Three or four sections in all, perhaps. Years ago there had been a deep gully down the center of the meadow, cut

in the sandy soil by rushing spring freshets that boiled down from the mountains. In the hot summer months the gully had always been bone-dry, but Pelham had changed that by the simple construction of a levee across the upper end of the wide valley that formed a reservoir to catch and hold the spring floods, backing the precious water up into a miniature lake and impounding it to be released through a series of side ditches as needed through the growing season.

It was, Charlie saw, a crude but effective method of irrigation which made the grass in the valley grow rank and knee-high instead of the short growth it had formerly attained. And even now it was ready for a first cutting of hay, with plenty of time yet for a second crop to grow high before the heat of summer was over.

Charlie shook his head in dismay at himself and his own disloyal thoughts as the evidence of Pelham's bold imagination and ingenuity was spread out before his eyes. For generations the ranchers of the West had stubbornly refused to recognize progress, to change the settled way of the range. Grass was for grazing during the summer, to fatten beef-stuff for fall shipping. That's the way it was done all over the West, which resulted in a great influx of fat beef to the markets in the fall, with a subsequent dropping-off of the market price because of lack of demand.

And, conversely, market prices were high in the spring when cattle were gaunt and thin from scarcity of winter feed and there was little if any range stock fit to be shipped to the slaughterhouses.

An unwilling admiration for Pelham welled up inside Charlie Barnes as he realized that the Bar L owner was successfully turning tradition to his own advantage. By cutting the meadow hay and stacking it during the summer, forcing his stock to graze the more barren hillsides for sustenance, he was reversing the time-honored fattening time and shipping his beef in the spring while prices were high.

Against Charlie's innate cattleman's distrust of any change that smacked of turning the range into farmland was the indisputable evidence of his eyes that Pelham was making money while those about him were bogged down in debt and barely making ends meet.

He began to wonder if those vague rumors against Pelham, the insinuations that he was in league with the Mexican Border rustlers might not be wholly without factual basis. He wanted to hate Henry Pelham, he wanted to believe the worst of the new Bar L owner, but he could not be otherwise than honest with himself. Here was reason enough for Pelham's prosperity. Scorn his methods or hate them, a man had to admit he was using his head for something besides a place to rest his hat.

RIDING across the lushly grassed valley, Charlie turned his thoughts unwillingly to his own small ranch north of Chapparell. As Pelham had pointed out less than an hour ago, the same opportunity existed there for cutting hay and stacking it for winter feed. Not on so large a scale, but with a little conservation of water and some rudimentary attempt at irrigation he had nearly a section of land that would grow as good hay as Pelham grew.

Instead, Charlie still followed the old custom of grazing his stuff on it through the summer, trying to fatten them up after a hard winter for fall shipping. And each fall for years past, market prices had been growing less and less until now they reached a low point where a man was sometimes lucky to get back transportation costs from a shipment. It was a slow sure way of going broke, and Charlie was one of the few Arizonians who had sense enough to realize he was bucking the inevitable. Yet for years he had gone on the same old way, ostrich-like, refusing to take modern advantage of the possibilities of his own ranch.

It was galling to admit that a man like Henry Pelham had to be the one to come in and show them how wrong they had been, but Charlie was enough of a realist to accept facts without argument.

Approaching the ranch buildings, he discovered that he was now glad the letter from the Rio Kid had prompted him to accept Pelham's offer of a job in order to have an excuse for sticking around the Bar L for a few days. He resolved he'd keep his eyes open, by golly, and learn all he could about this haying business while he was watching out for the Rio Kid.

Everywhere before him in the dusk of evening was concrete evidence of the extent of the rehabilitation of the old run-down Bar L ranch. There were new corrals and cutting pens, modern branding

chutes and capacious barns. The adobe walls of the ranch house itself had merely been repaired, but there was a new frame bunkhouse behind it, and farther up the slope was another long narrow frame building which he guessed had been built to house the Mexican laborers hired to do the manual labor in the hay-fields which the regular cowboys regarded as beneath their dignity.

Half a dozen spurred and gunned riders were squatting against the outer wall of the bunkhouse waiting for the supper bell to ring when Charlie rode up to the corral. He saw their watchful hostile gaze upon him, and though he didn't recognize any of their hard faces he knew he had seen them all at one time or another in Chapparell where they were a close-mouthed crew, sticking close together and avoiding contact with other punchers.

He gazed back at them coldly, making no sign of greeting. An old man hobbled out of one of the barns and approached him when he swung out of the saddle and started to loosen his girth. The old man was bald-headed and had wizened features. He dragged a club foot and wheezed with asthma. His voice was high-pitched and querulous:

"Lookin' fer someun, young feller?"

Charlie shook his head stolidly. "I'm on the pay roll . . . beginnin' tomorrow mornin'."

The old hostler squinted rheumy eyes at him, at his puncher's garb and the significant fact that he carried no gun. "You don't look none like the kinda rider the boss gen'ally hires."

Charlie said, "Don't I?" He pulled his saddle and blanket off. "Where'll I put my horse where I can catch him up later? I may take a little ride aroun' tonight."

"Stick him in this pen over here." The old man hobbled in front of him to unlatch a heavy hinged gate into a small corral where two other saddle horses munched new-cut hay in feed troughs. Charlie slipped the bridle off and slapped the roan on his sweaty flank, sent him trotting into the corral. "Where'll I find the foreman?"

"Up to thuh bunkhouse, I reckon." The old man dragged his heavy foot back to the barn and Charlie turned up the slope to the bunkhouse.

The row of squatting figures did not move as he approached. Complete silence held them, though Charlie had an uneasy feeling that he had been the subject of spirited discussion until he was close enough to hear what was being said. They were a hard-bitten bunch, with none of the joviality that generally characterizes the Western cowboy as he relaxes before supper after a hard day in the saddle. Charlie met only cold, impersonal stares and blank features as he walked up stolidly and stopped in front of them. He rubbed his blunt chin and asked mildly, "Which of you is the foreman?"

The man on the end of the row was heavy-shouldered, with swarthy features and a hooked nose that had a westward slant to it. He, in common with two others, wore two guns, and he was chewing a straw between yellowed snag teeth. He tilted the straw upward and looked past the end of it up at Charlie thoughtfully, then grunted, "I'm him. What yuh want?"

"Mr. Pelham," said Charlie, carefully suppressing his rising anger, "said you'd fix me up with supper and a place to bunk."

"What for? You a friend of his?"

"I'm workin' here."

The foreman's eyes traveled slowly down from the crown of Charlie's hat to the toes of his boots. The third man on the foreman's left snickered into the silence. Charlie turned his head and considered him gravely. He had a thin hatchet face and a great deal of very thin nose that came to such a sharp point it appeared to have been filed that way. He had shifty eyes and he kept blinking his lids as Charlie stared at him.

"What," asked Charlie gently, "is so damn' funny?"

"The idee of you workin' here." The hatchet-faced puncher yawned and started to get up. He was another of the three who carried two guns in criss-crossed belts. His hands went to the low holsters as he stood up.

CHARLIE Barnes leaped forward with tigerish agility surprisingly at variance with his mild expression and solid build. He drove his right fist to the end of the man's pointed jaw before he came fully erect. The back of the gunman's head thumped solidly against the wall behind him. He slid back to the ground slowly and his eyeballs became glazed.

Teetering on the balls of his feet, Charlie demanded, "Anybody else feel like laughin'?"

Before the others could answer, the foreman ordered gruffly, "Lay off. If thuh boss hired him, that's the boss' business.' He jerked a thick thumb toward the doorway of the bunkhouse. "Take the bunk at the west end. Cookie'll ring fer supper purty quick."

Charlie Barnes nodded stolidly. He squatted on his heels in front of the others lined up along the wall, and built himself a cigarette with steady fingers. Hatchet-face moaned and feebly essayed to sit up. He wiggled his jaw with uncertain fingers and mumbled, "Did a haws kick me?"

The man at the end of the row was a smooth-faced youth with hot queasy eyes and a surly mouth. He laughed jeeringly. "Pull yore guns fust next time, Mart."

No one else laughed nor said anything. Charlie scratched a match and held the flame to his cigarette. When it was drawing well, he said, "I reckon maybe you-all mistook what I was hired for. I don't claim to be a gun-hand, but it don't look like Pelham needs any more of them. I'm gonna run the hay-cuttin' machine."

"A danged farmhand," the smooth-faced lad jeered. "He don't belong bunkin' with us, Pat," to the foreman. "Whyn't you send him up with the other hay-cutters?"

The foreman's reply was a surly grunt. The man next to him answered, "Pat ain't takin' no chances of sendin' competition tuh sleep up near-abouts Tonita. He's done give all us our awders tuh stay plumb away from her. You know that, Billy," and the man next to the end from Billy, bearded and red-faced, gibed, "Pat's biggest worry there is gonna be cuttin' out the sheriff from town. He was here this afternoon, all dressed up in fancy duds, stakin' out his claim."

The foreman, Pat, spat out his straw and drawled derisively, "I ain't worryin' none aboot Tonita an' the sheriff. I'm takin' her fer a ride in thuh hills tonight, an' after she comes back she won't be int'rested in the sheriff's fancy duds no more."

All of the men laughed coarsely, except Mart, who was still tenderly rubbing his jaw and darting an occasional venomous glance toward Charlie.

A yellow-skinned Chink came from the rear door of the adobe ranch house and lustily rang an iron cowbell to summon the hands to dinner.

Charlie followed the others in morosely. There were dark undercurrents here that worried him no little. Tonita must be the new Mexican girl both Les Edwards and Henry Pelham had mentioned. A beautiful young girl was as dangerous around a bunch of gunmen like these as a spark in a keg of black powder. Add the weak-chinned possessor of a law-badge and mix well . . . only God could know what sort of an eruption would result.

And all he wanted was a chance to remain on the ranch peacefully for a few days in the hope of intercepting the Rio Kid before he rode blithely from El Paso into a trap. But his plan to patrol the east boundary at night to head off the Kid looked like it might already have hit a snag. If the foreman was going to be riding with Tonita he wasn't likely to look with favor upon the nocturnal prowling of a new hand—it would look too much like an attempt to spy on his love-making.

For the first time in his life Charlie Barnes caught himself wishing he was not so much a man of peace, longing for the weight of a six-gun on his hip and the sure ability to throw lead as fast as any other man. He had a foreboding hunch his fists weren't going to be enough on the Bar L.

CHAPTER VI

THE foreman stayed behind, talking to the Chinese cook, after the others finished dinner. It had been a good dinner, more and better grub than Charlie Barnes put on the table for himself and his hands, and he left the long pine table with a feeling of well-fed satisfaction.

The soft coolness of an early night breeze caressed his face outside the ranch house. The others had strolled on ahead to the bunkhouse, and he hesitated outside the door, rolling a cigarette and glancing up at fleecy white clouds scudding in front of the moon.

A feeling of lethargic contentment was hard to shake off. He found himself trying to put off thoughts of the very serious business that had brought him to the Bar L. Mart had been surly and glum at the supper table, but the others had acted as though he weren't there. He decided they'd probably leave him alone in the future if he left them alone. That's all he asked.

The soft thrumming of a guitar drifted through the night from the Mexican quar-

ters farther up the hillside. After a moment a young girl's rich voice joined the guitar. She was singing Mi Probecita, and the plaintive haunting sweetness of the native folk-song brought a queer choking into a lonely man's throat when he listened to it through the darkness.

Charlie wondered if it was Tonita singing, whether she was a nice girl; and if she wanted to go riding with Pat tonight. His thoughts were vagrant and all mixed-up. He hesitated to go on to the bunkhouse where the others had mentioned a stud poker game. He stayed there in the shadow of the ranch house, and without warning his gaze and his thoughts went toward the Triangle A in the far distance.

There was acute pain in thinking of Peggy and Henry Pelham together. He knew Peggy had been dismayed and disappointed when he allowed Henry Pelham to order him away from the ranch. He had seen the look of gladness in her eyes there on the porch when he called Henry's hand. He hated to recall how that look of gladness had given way to one of dreary despair when he agreed to take Pelham's offered job. But he defended himself with the thought that it was best she shouldn't understand the motive that had prompted him to accept the job. Only God knew how the Rio Kid's return would come out. If it turned out badly Peggy would be better off if she never knew.

The foreman came out of the ranch house carrying a tin basin of steaming hot water extended in front of him. He passed Charlie without seeing him, went on toward the bunkhouse to shave his swarthy face, Charlie supposed, in preparation for his date with Tonita.

Charlie hesitated a moment longer, then angrily turned on his heel and strode up the slope behind the bunkhouse toward the quarters of the Mexican laborers. The girl was singing again, a different song now, one that Charlie did not recognize.

A small fire of dry mesquite roots crackled in front of the Mexican quarters. Quiet figures with colorful serapes around their shoulders were grouped about the fire, and the girl stood erect in front of the dancing flames. The man who strummed a soft accompaniment on his guitar was withdrawn from the group, squatting on his heels in the shadow of the house.

The girl was beautiful, and she was extremely young. Silhouetted against the firelight, her figure showed lithe and slender. She tilted her head to look at Charlie as he entered the circle of firelight, and her full, parted lips smiled at him with the unaffected coquettishness of an unawakened child while rich melody continued to pour from them.

No one spoke until her song was ended and there were nods and grunts of approbation from the silent figures about the fire. She stepped back out of the firelight and it seemed that a magical spell was broken. A tall, grave-featured Mexican arose and nodded courteously to Charlie. In his native tongue, he said, "The Senor is welcome among us."

Charlie thanked him in the Mexican language, and said hesitantly, "I was attracted here by the music. The song was beautiful."

"Gracias, Senor." There was a note of pride in the tall Mexican's voice. "It was my Tonita who sang." He added politely, "The Senor is a new vaquero, no?"

"A new hand on the pay roll," Charlie told him simply. "Hardly a vaquero. Not the Bar L kind."

The Mexican nodded his understanding and offered him a corn-husk cigarette wrapping and a sack of tobacco. Charlie squatted beside him and rolled a long cigarillo. One by one the other Mexicans about the fire arose and quietly faded away.

"We are but lately come from Mexico to cut the hay," his host explained to Charlie. "There are many things we do not understand here . . . some things we do not like."

"I'm to help you with the hay," Charlie explained hastily. "Driving the cutting machine."

THE girl, Tonita, appeared momentarily, passing through the outer circle of firelight toward the corrals. The Mexican by Charlie's side stopped her with a sharp, "Tonita!"

She turned, poised as though for flight, and Charlie had a fleeting impression of an unbroken colt whirling and planting its forefeet at the first feel of a rope about its neck. But she replied submissively, "Si, Papa?"

He asked sternly, "Where are you going in the night?"

A placid brown-faced woman came from the shadows behind them. She spoke rapidly in a flat monotone that held terror in it. She told her husband that the fore-

man had ordered Tonita to ride with him, and she wrung her work-roughened hands unhappily while she spoke.

"Por Dios," muttered Tonita's father. "This I do not like." He turned to Charlie and murmured, "You will excuse me, Senor," then got up to grasp Tonita's arm and lead her away from the fire out of earshot.

Charlie squatted by the fire and morosely sucked on his cigarette while the murmur of voices from father and daughter came to him. He felt acutely ill at ease because he, too, was an American like Pat who had ordered the Mexican girl to ride with him.

A burst of ribald merriment drifted up the hillside from the riders' bunkhouse. That would be the others, ribbing the foreman while he shaved for his date with the girl.

Tonita's father came back alone with a measured stride. His features were set in grim tight lines but he did not speak of what troubled him.

He began to talk, instead, of the haying work ahead, with many gesticulations of his sinewy hands and flashing of his white teeth. Yet, even while he spoke Charlie knew his ears were open for sounds from the corral, and once while he paused after a sentence a twinge of pain crossed his face when the hoofbeats of two horses trotting away from the ranch came to them.

It was not more than ten minutes after that when a rider galloped up the road from Chapparell and came directly to the Mexican quarters without pausing at the ranch or bunkhouse. It was Les Edwards, his face flushed with drink and his eyes bloodshot. He gave Charlie Barnes no sign of recognition as he demanded, "Where's Tonita? I told her I'd be back to see her tonight?"

The Mexican beside Charlie arose courteously. "Si, Senor Sheriff, but she did not know. . . ."

He was speaking Mexican and Edwards interrupted him impatiently, "I can't understand that lingo. Talk English."

"Si, Senor. I weel try." The Mexican nodded submissively. "Tonita, she ees . . . I don' know for how you say . . ."

"Tonita," said Charlie roughly, "has gone for a ride with the foreman. You got here about ten minutes late, Les."

Les Edwards gave a startled exclamation as he looked directly at Charlie for the first time and recognized him. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "You had a hand in this, Barnes?"

Charlie laughed sardonically. "A hand in what? Getting Tonita away from your filthy hands? Maybe I would have, except I don't figure she's any better off with Pat."

Les Edwards cursed luridly. In terse sentences he told them what he would do to Pat for trying to steal his girl. Then he asked thickly, "Which way'd they go?"

"That way." Charlie pointed in the direction the two trotting horses had taken. Edwards reined his horse away from the fire and spurred in the direction Charlie had pointed.

The girl's father gazed after him, shaking his head sadly. "This is not good, Senor. It is evil for Tonita. I feel it here." He put his hand over his heart.

"It ain't good," he agreed. "Excep' maybe he and Pat'll kill each other an' that sure won't be no loss." He stood up and placed his hand on the Mexican's shoulder. "Reckon I might mosey along too, to sorta keep an eye on things. If anything happens I'll try my best to see Tonita gets home safe."

The father's eyes thanked him wordlessly. He stood there like a statue while Charlie strode away, but he hadn't gone more than ten paces when he heard the Mexican issuing crisp orders to someone to saddle up his burro at once.

CHARLIE continued on to the corral thoughtfully. The Bar L range was sure due to be overcrowded tonight. He hoped to God the Rio Kid wouldn't pop up unexpectedly to complicate matters further. Les Edwards was a crazy fool to go looking for trouble with Pat while he was half drunk. The foreman was a gun-killer if Charlie had ever seen one. Les wouldn't be any match for him dead sober.

And that reminded Charlie that he was totally unarmed. He'd be sticking his neck into something if he rode out there without even a saddle-gun to protect himself with.

He hesitated with his hand on the gate where his roan was penned, then turned back toward the bunkhouse.

In the yellow light of a kerosene lantern hung from a rafter the five Bar L hands were sitting around an improvised poker table when Charlie entered the door. Billy glanced up at him with a sneer as he

threw a hand of cards down. "Here's the farmer wantin' to join us, I reckon."

"Nope," Charlie disclaimed. "I'm only wantin' to borrow a shootin' iron. You, Mart." He fixed his cold gaze on the hatchet-faced man whom he had knocked down outside the bunkhouse. "You've got a couple you don't go for very fast. How about loanin' me one of 'em?"

All of them around the poker table had divested themselves of their guns before starting play, and their belts and holsters hung on nails over their bunks. Mart started to snarl an angry "No," then changed his mind and asked with a leer:

"Whatcha wanta gun for tonight?"

"Les Edwards just rode out lookin' for Pat an' that Mex girl," Charlie explained swiftly. "I aim to follow an' try to stop any trouble an' I reckon I'll feel better with a six-shooter handy."

The bearded puncher guffawed loudly and urged Mart, "Loan him yore gun an' let him get his fingers burnt for tryin' tuh play nursemaid."

"Shore," Mart agreed instantly. "Go to it, hayman. There's both my guns . . . hangin' over yonder bunk."

"I won't need but one," Charlie told him placidly. He stepped around the poker table and got Mart's belt carrying the right-hand holster, strapped it about his waist and hurried out without another word. A wave of derisive laughter followed him out to the corral, and he thought to himself angrily that he didn't blame them any. A fellow that horned into another man's business in Arizona was always a fool . . . but this was one time when another man's business was his own.

He grabbed up his bridle and went through the gate, whistling softly to his roan who came forward to nuzzle him.

The other two horses that had been penned with the roan were gone now. Ridden, Charlie supposed, by Pat and Tonita.

He slid the bit into the horse's mouth and led him out, threw the saddle on and mounted. Not more than twenty minutes behind Les Edwards, he followed the young sheriff into the vast emptiness of the Arizona night.

CHAPTER VII

THE RIO KID rode alertly down the long slope, with shortened reins that held Thunderbolt to a jumpy lope, head up and vigilant gaze raking the moonlight-drenched terrain for signs of trouble ahead.

He had ridden into danger often like this in the past three years, driven by a sharp unease of spirit that found a sort of anodyne in physical combat, goaded by a reckless daring that could be assuaged only by the pitting of his own life against heavy odds.

He was motivated by no such mood as he rode down into the Bar L pasture tonight. He knew that reckless daring would avail him nothing here where the odds would be a hundred guns against one if he were seen and recognized. He had promised himself he would use the utmost caution on his return to Chapparell, but the challenge of the locked iron gates and the single mysterious shot in the night had been too strong for him to resist. The old impulse to dare boldly everything had hold of him again, and his only concession to caution was a tight rein on Thunderbolt and open-eyed vigilance as he rode onward.

He sensed rather than saw movement on his left and in front of him. Mesquite and catclaw grew sparsely here, and in the moonlight the single stunted bushes assumed all manner of grotesque shapes so it was difficult to distinguish the real from the imaginary.

He reined Thunderbolt down to a walk, leaning forward along his satiny neck and speaking soothing words into the black stallion's sensitive ears while his gaze searched ahead and to the left where he had discerned movement.

He saw it again. A rider on a fleet horse streaking through the brush at an angle away from him. The horse was dark, but had a blazed forefoot that showed clearly in the moonlight when gaps in the bushes allowed clear view.

There was a suggestion of terror in the swift flight of the horseman, or so it seemed to the Rio Kid whose perceptions were sensitized by the danger into which he rode. He didn't know what made him feel that way. A fleeting instinct came to him, perhaps the actual scent of panic in his keen nostrils, a vibration of fear cast off by the fleeing rider who was swiftly drawing away from him without being aware of his presence.

He touched Thunderbolt's smooth sides with blunt spurs to send the black lunging in pursuit, again impelled by instinct rather than by conscious thought.

Astride the fastest mount in the Southwest, the Rio Kid rapidly closed the gap separating him from the galloping rider. He rode erect, loose in the saddle, exultant with the rush of air against his face, suddenly eager to make his first contact with the old life.

He drew a gun and urged more speed from Thunderbolt when he saw the white blur of a face turned back toward him from the rider ahead and knew that his pursuit had been noted.

Momentarily he expected a flash of fire from the unknown rider who was being rapidly overtaken and he was prepared to return the fire, but no lead came singing back at him.

There was only the rhythmic thud of eight hooves spurning the ground, and as he and Thunderbolt drew nearer, the wheezing breath of the hard-ridden horse ahead.

The rider looked slim and youthful in the moonlight, leaning over his horse's neck to urge a last burst of speed from the tiring animal, and the look of grim resolution on the Kid's face changed to one of blank amazement as Thunderbolt ranged up alongside the other horse and he caught his first real glimpse of the rider's face.

The thin oval of Tonita's face was pale and strained as she darted a despairing glance sideways. Her eyes were dilated and enormous, tortured with fear, and the recollection of them was to torment the Kid for days to come.

DISCOVERING the night rider to be a beautiful girl gave a touch of unreality and of madness to the whole scene, and the Kid's thoughts reeled under the impact of surprise. He checked Thunderbolt to gallop beside the girl, holstered his gun and lifted his fingers to the brim of his hat, stammering, "Howdy, Miss. I reckon . . . well, howdy."

Her horse was faltering in his stride, wheezing brokenly and rapidly slowing to a trot. When the girl made no reply but looked straight ahead, tossing her head as though in anger or contempt, the Rio Kid leaned forward from his sadle and caught her bridle rein, firmly pulling her horse down to a walk and then to a full stop, saying soberly, "No use runnin' him plumb off his laigs, Miss. He'll be awright if you let him blow a bit. I'll just keep these here reins till he catches his breath."

It wasn't until she spoke to him in Spanish that he realized the girl wasn't an American. She angrily demanded his reason for interfering and stopping her ride, and her dark eyes flashed sultry wrath while the Spanish sibilants sizzled from her lips.

When the Rio Kid replied to her in Spanish as fluent as her own some of the outraged anger left her face though her young bosom continued to heave up and down while her breath panted in and out between tight lips.

He had just been riding through, the Kid explained smoothly, when he heard a pistol shot. Then, when he had seen her fleeing away through the night, well . . . he shrugged his shoulders. Being a stranger and all, he had thought he'd better investigate. That was all. And would the Senorita be pleased to explain?"

Tonita's slender shoulders drooped wretchedly beneath the Kid's searching gaze. He saw that she was a mere child, and horribly frightened. But her full lips gamely tried to form a smile that was meant to be coquettish and she impulsively laid a trembling warm hand on his arm.

"Es nada, Senor," she breathed rapidly. "It is nothing at all. I was riding with a . . . a friend and he shot at a coyote. That was the sound you heard." And her horse was gun-shy, she went on to explain rapidly, and had bolted and run away. That was all. Truly it was. "Es verdad, Senor," with a tremolo in her voice that implored him to believe her story.

The Rio Kid knew she was lying. Her voice held nuances of fear that would have told him she was lying even if he hadn't seen her desperately trying to outpace him on a horse that certainly had not been running away out of control.

He said nothing, however, but drew his off-gun and fired it into the ground without warning. Her jaded mount reacted to the gun-shot with only a weary twitch of his ears. The Kid holstered his gun and said matter-of-factly, "Your horse seems to have got all over being gun-shy."

Crimson flooded her pale cheeks. She caught her lower lip between firm teeth that glistened white in the moonlight. Then she tossed her head and said stiffly, "If the Senor chooses to disbelieve me, Tonita cannot help that. I will go now."

The Kid shook his head and caught her bridle rein again. "I don't think it's safe for you to be riding around alone. I'll go

with you. Has a Mexican outfit taken over the Bar L?"

Her face showed fear again, and rising anger. But she repressed both, replying to his question, "But, no. Senor Pelham owns this ranch. My father and others have come from Mexico to work in the hay-field."

"Pelham? Hay-field?" the Kid repeated stupidly. He came to a sudden decision, started to turn both horses about. "I reckon we'd better back-track you and see just what's back there where the shooting was."

He jerked his head up and listened intently as he turned the horses about. A furtive sound drifted through the night silence from behind. Something was moving almost soundlessly on their trail; a four-footed animal from the sound, yet not heavy enough for a horse.

Tonita glanced at him swiftly when he checked the horses. She saw the look of questioning on his face, heard the sounds too, and recognized them.

She swayed in the saddle toward him, and before the Rio Kid was aware of her intention two soft arms clasped him about the neck and she was clinging to him tightly, half-lifted out of her saddle.

He started a confused protest, but warm lips were seeking his, the soft flesh of her young breasts was crushed against his body and when he unwillingly lowered his eyes to hers he saw a starry brightness reflected from hers that swept his mind of every other thought save an answering passion to possess the lips offered to him.

The blood pounded hotly through his veins, blacking out every other sound. He was young and lonely, and his youth responded to Tonita's. There was a freshness and a virginal purity about her lips that no man could mistake, and his arms went around her lithe body, crushing her closer and closer while the madness took full possession of his senses. He was, after all, only a young man who had been denied the normal companionship of decent girls, and there was a fierce hunger within him that was not easily sated.

Tonita was young and unversed in love. She had seen lust in the eyes of men when they looked at her, and she knew those men and their desires were bad. But she knew instinctively that this tall lean-featured young rider was not bad. Though she had first given her lips to him as a desperate sacrifice to draw his attention from those queer sounds on the trail behind them, she found her first kiss from a man far from an unpleasant experience. She let herself go lax in his tight grip, and the strength and resistance were drained out of her body. Her lips were responding to the pressure of his, fervidly and without shame. She wondered confusedly why her parents had warned her against giving her caresses to a man, and in the splendor of the momen. she was fiercely glad she had chosen this method of covering her father's approach on his soft-footed burro.

THE KID held her tightly in the moonlight for many minutes with his mouth pressed tightly down upon her lips. When he slowly relaxed his grip and she slid back into her own saddle a sense of high exaltation gripped him. It wasn't love. He was far too cynical and understanding to fall into that trap on the spur of the moment, but there was a shaky feeling of emptiness inside of him, and every other consideration was swept away by the poignant realization that this something had been stolen out of his youth when he rode into Mexico on the renegade trail.

While he stared at Tonita, seeking to form words that would express his true feelings, she breathed a soft, "Adios Senor," that had a lilting note but nothing of mockery in it, then clapped silver spurs to her rested mount and galloped away without another word toward the Bar L.

The Kid started to follow her, then checked his first impulse. He moodily rolled a cigarette while his gaze watched her erect figure merge with the haze of moonlit radiance. He didn't dare ride into the Bar L. Not yet. And there was still the unexplained mystery of that gunshot back along the trail from whence she had come.

He had forgotten all about the queer pattering sound behind them when he wheeled Thunderbolt into Tonita's back trail and began following it at a fast trot. He leaned from the saddle to watch for the tracks kicked up by her galloping horse, and it wasn't until a few hundred yards away when the tracks of an unshod burro joined those of her horse that he recalled the sounds he had heard just before she flung her arms about his neck.

He pulled Thunderbolt up sharply and frowned down at the message written for him to see in the soft sand. The burro

had followed Tonita, had turned off from her trail at that point, angling off toward the Bar L on a wide circle to avoid the point where he had held Tonita in his arms.

It was all as clear to him as though he were reading a letter with everything explained in words that he could read. Someone had been following Tonita on a burro. She must have heard the light hoofbeats when he did, and instantly recognized what they meant. To prevent him from seeing the burro-rider, she had thrown her arms about his neck and pulled his lips down to hers.

The Rio Kid grinned down wryly at the burro tracks. So, that explained her action. Somehow, he wasn't wholly displeased. It gave reason and meaning to the madness of the scene. And he couldn't rid himself of the thought that no matter what had prompted her to do it, she hadn't pulled away from him quite as fast as she might after the danger was averted. In fact, he reminded himself that she hadn't pulled away from him at all. It wasn't a bad beginning for his home-coming. He started up again on the back-trail, humming a little tune as he rode, more at peace with himself and with the world than he had been for three harrowing years.

Thunderbolt tossed his head and snorted nervously when they had followed the trail of horse and burro not more than half a mile, about to the point where the shot had sounded, the Rio Kid guessed.

He pulled the nervous stallion to a walk, standing in the stirrups to peer ahead through the moonlight.

A horse nickered in front of them and the Kid's pulse leaped with excitement. Maybe that would be Charlie Barnes. He called out softly but received no answer.

Then he saw the horse, saddled but riderless, standing patiently with drooping head beside the trail.

And a little beyond there was the dark blur of a figure lying on the ground.

The Rio Kid swung out of the saddle and dropped Thunderbolt's reins, strode forward with his hands on his guns, alert for any sign of a trap.

But the man who lay face down in the trail was not likely to bother anyone again. There was a bullet hole in his back under the right shoulder blade, and blood had soaked into the dry sand under him.

The Kid turned the dead body over—and stared down with wide disbelieving eyes at a silver star that reflected moonlight from the dead man's vest.

For a long time he stared at that star as though hypnotized, not daring to look at the man's face, fighting back a crazed feeling that this was three years ago, that he was a frightened kid kneeling in the trail by Sheriff Edwards' body again.

Things blurred before his staring eyes and went out of focus. He gritted his teeth and wondered if he was losing his sanity.

This wasn't three years ago. This was now. But that star! He could swear it was the same silver badge.

His hands were clenched so tightly that the fingernails dug into the calloused flesh of his palms. Though there was a cool breeze on his face, streams of sweat ran down his cheeks and dripped off his chin.

He forced his eyes to open wide, and he made them turn away from the hypnotic influence of that lawman's star of silver that blinked up at him malignantly.

His gaze slid up to the dead man's face and remained riveted there.

Les Edwards! Son of the man whom he was accused of murdering three years ago.

And here he was, the first night of his return, kneeling over the son's body—shot through the back as his father had been.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR A LONG time the Rio Kid knelt, unmoving, beside Les Edwards' dead body. The shock of the corpse's identity left him numbed, without the ability to think or to act.

He hadn't known Les very well in the old days. There was no grief in suddenly coming upon him dead. If it hadn't been for the fact that he wore that silver star—his father's star—the Kid would have been totally unmoved by his discovery. Violent death was nothing new to him. He was on intimate terms with Death in all its various guises.

Suddenly he found that his breath was coming in rasping jerks, that he was cursing in a slow, cold monotone there alone in the moonlight.

This was too much, by God. Once before, three years ago, fate had tricked him in exactly the same way. He had given in that time. He had been a frightened kid who didn't know any better. Now, he wasn't a frightened kid any longer. This

time he wouldn't flee across the Border without defending himself.

Then all the ghastly implications of the affair burst upon his senses like an exploding bombshell. He was trapped now, tighter than he had been that previous time. With the old charge of murdering the father still hanging over his head, who would believe he had not also murdered the son—shot from behind on the moment of the Kid's return?

The numbness slowly went out of him and he relaxed back on his haunches. He made himself a cigarette with nimble fingers while his thoughts followed trails of cold remorseless logic. No use cursing the fate that had drawn him here at this precise moment. The harm was done now. What came next?

He put away all thought of flight. He had traveled a long trail back and he'd be damned if he'd give up his dream without a fight.

But every turning from this point was fraught with unknown perils. If he simply rode away and left Les Edwards lying there to be discovered later—what then?

What about the Mexican girl? Would she tell of meeting him there in the night? The mere proof of his presence near the scene of Les Edwards' death would be enough to hang the crime on him in the minds of all those already convinced of his previous guilt.

What about the Mexican girl?

The question pounded through his mind. He had back-trailed her to this point. There was no doubt that she had been with or near Les Edwards when he died. He knew she had lied about her horse being gun-shy and bolting when her companion shot at a coyote. She had obviously been panic-stricken.

Even as a young lad, the Rio Kid recalled, Les had made himself a bad reputation with the girls. He was the type who might easily have turned into a woman-chaser as he matured. It was perfectly plausible to presume that he had inveigled the beautiful young Mexican girl to ride with him in the moonlight—had insulted her and she had gunned him in self-protection.

But she wasn't armed when the Kid stopped her. Still she had had plenty of time and might have discarded her weapon.

What about the mysterious burro rider whose trail also led away from the dead body? The burro marked the rider as a Mexican in all probability.

The Rio Kid sucked deeply on his cigarette and his gray eyes glinted as he nodded to himself.

That looked like the plausible answer. She had been followed on her night ride by a member of her own race, a member of her family, perhaps. He knew the fierce loyalty that binds Mexican families. He knew the savage paternal instinct that guards a young daughter's chastity. He could easily visualize what must have happened.

That's why Tonita had thrown herself into his arms to prevent him from seeing the burro rider. She knew what had happened back there, knew the danger to her guardian if it was discovered that he had killed an American sheriff—even though the lethal shot had been fired to protect her honor.

The Kid's face became grim and hard in the moonlight. He knew the average Arizonian's hatred for their brown-skinned neighbors across the Border. He had been reared in that atmosphere of hatred, and it had required a sojourn among the Mexicans to cause him to drop his own prejudices against the race. He had found them to be an honest industrious people, honorable and peace-loving, and he had learned to respect and admire them during his three years in exile.

But he was one of the few Americans who felt that way. Along the Border, any Mexican girl was regarded as fair prey by the American punchers. They weren't supposed to resist insults; and for a Mexican father to have the temerity to shoot down an American even in defense of his daughter's honor would be regarded as murder.

The Kid shook his head angrily and spun his dead cigarette away. He had a certain code of ethics that rebelled at the thought of sacrificing a Mexican to the intolerant hatred of his countrymen even to clear himself of suspicion.

He couldn't do that to Tonita. Not to the sweet young girl who had given him her lips back there in the moonlight.

HIS hard lips twitched into a smile of mockery at himself as he reached that decision. By God, he was all at once turning noble. The Rio Kid, rated as one of the toughest hombres to ever ride the

owl-hoot trail, was going to cover up for a Mexican, though it might be his own neck for so doing.

It was funny as hell, all right. But his laughter didn't carry much humor. It was a sardonic challenge to the trick of fate that had brought all this about. Maybe this was his chance to make up for a lot of things in his past he would prefer to forget. It was hard to believe it was mere coincidence that had brought him to Les Edwards' side tonight. There had to be some meaning beshind it. Maybe there was a just God, after all. Maybe he was being given this one chance to perform a decent act to wipe out all his past sins.

He wasn't very good at philosophy. He would have thrown back his head and jeered at anyone else saying the things he himself was thinking. Let it go that he was stuck anyway, and it wouldn't do any good to drag the Mexicans into it.

He stiffened suddenly as a faint sound came to his ears from behind. A dry mesquite bean cracking under a soft footstep. He had been so engrossed in his own bitter musings that he had let his guard down. Now the sound came from a point not more than ten feet away.

Even as he tensed and his hands darted to his guns, a drawling voice warned, "I'll drill you if you move. Put yore hands on top of yore head an' hold 'em there."

The Rio Kid snorted with disgust at his own damn' foolishness in getting caught so easily. But there wasn't any good in him getting shot from behind and joining Les Edwards on the trail. He slowly lifted his hands away from his guns and clasped them together over the peaked crown of his hat.

He heard stealthy movement behind him, coming closer, and he waited stolidly without turning his head until first one holster and then the other was relieved of its weight.

He heard his captor breathe deeply with relief and then step back. He dropped his hands and turned his head slowly to look at the man behind him.

The deep breath of relief turned into a gasp of astonishment: "Hugh! Hugh Aiken."

The Kid said, "Howdy, Charlie. This is a right onfriendly way for an' old friend to act after I ain't seen you for so long."

"Hugh," Charlie Barnes stammered again. He looked beyond the Kid at the body of Les Edwards and a swift expression of revulsion crossed his stolid features. He shuddered and looked down at the Kid's two guns in his hands. "What are you doing here, Hugh?"

"I wrote you I was comin'. Did you get my letter?"

Charlie nodded unhappily. "Today."

"An' you come out tuh meet me tonight?" Gladness edged the Kid's voice. "I knew I could count on you, Charlie. I reckon yo're the only one hereaboots I can count on."

"That's . . . Les Edwards lyin' there, isn't it?"

The Kid nodded cheerfully. "Shot through the back."

Charlie shuddered again. "Just like . . ." He paused, unable to go on.

"Yep." The Kid's voice hardened. "Jest like his Pappy before him. Seems like them Edwards will never learn to dodge bullets from behind." Beneath the bantering tone of his voice was a fierce note of questioning.

"This is hell," Charlie exploded helplessly. "You won't dare show yourself now. Not after this." He gestured toward the corpse with one of the Kid's guns.

The Rio Kid reached a sinewy hand for it. He plucked the .45 out of Charlie's unresisting hand and reached for the other one, muttering, "I've got so I feel sorta undressed without my guns." He slid them into their holsters, then said roughly, "Maybe it's better with Les dead. I notice he's wearin' his daddy's star, big as life. Les always hated me. I reckon I shore wouldn't of had much chance with him bein' sheriff."

"Is that why . . . you gunned him?"

"Who said I did?"

"Are you going to deny it, Hugh?" Charlie shook his head sadly. "I've always been willing to believe maybe Sheriff Edwards' death was an accident or somethin'. But two accidents just don't happen to two sheriffs . . . father an' son . . . exactly the same way."

There it was. Just as the Kid had foreseen it would be. Even his old and trusted friend refused to accept the possibility of such an absurd coincidence.

The Kid's resolution hardened. What was the use of denying it? To do so might only cause trouble for Tonita—and wouldn't do him any good.

He changed the subject abruptly by asking, "You seen Peggy lately?"

"Yeh. Yeh, sure. Just this afternoon I rode by the Triangle A."

"You an' her ain't . . . yo're not married, huh?"

"Nope. Not yet."

The Kid frowned at a hurried evasive note in Charlie's voice. "How's she gettin' on?"

"She's doin' all right. Fine." The heartiness of Charlie's response was overdone. The Kid drew his own conclusion from the reply, and it was not a pleasant one. He winced at the thought of the unhappiness he must have brought to his sister, and again changed the subject:

"How do things stand for me hereaboots? On that old charge, I mean."

"It don't look good," Charlie told him deliberately. "The poster is still up in the postoffice. They found your gun close to Sheriff Edwards' body that night, you know."

"Yeh," the Kid said gruffly. "I reckoned they had." He hesitated, then said, "I didn't kill him, Charlie."

"Well, all that's water under the bridge now." Charlie spoke as though he preferred not to pursue the subject. "Folks aren't going to ask whether you killed the old man or not when they find Les dead . . . and know you were in the Bar L pasture when it happened."

"What aboot the Bar L?" the Kid demanded. "Someone ranchin' it now?"

"Yeh. Feller name of Henry Pelham. Come in two or three years ago an' stocked it with good stuff. He's been doin' mighty good."

"How aboot gettin' his stuff rustled?"

"He don't seem to have any trouble that way," Charlie admitted after a faint hesitation. "He hires some tough gunhands, an' has built extra heavy fences."

"Locked with padlocks? But I never saw a fence that'd keep out rustlers before. Say his name's Henry Pelham?"

"That's right. No one knows where he drifted in from."

THE Rio Kid said, "H-m-m." He squatted down on his heels and slowly rolled a cigarette, his frowning gaze fixed on the horizon as though something puzzled him.

After a long silence he gave a jerk and asked, "Who found Sheriff Edwards that night . . . an' my gun?"

"Pete Trobridge. He was on his way back to Bloody Gap that night. . . ."

"U-m-m. Trobridge? Runs the saloon in Bloody Gap?"

"That's right. He swore you passed him riding hell-bent toward the Border without pausin' to pass the time o' day. And around the bend he come on Sheriff Edwards . . . shot through the back . . . an' yore gun laying near by with one empty cartridge. Being as how Edwards was headed that way to arrest you, an' you'd swore you wouldn't be arrested . . . well, there didn't seem to be much doubt what'd happened." Charlie Barnes spread out his hands expressively.

"I reckon not," the Rio Kid agreed. His brow was furrowed with deep thought.

"What did happen that night, Hugh? Last I saw of you was when you tore away from the dance to meet Sheriff Edwards on the trail, cussin' a blue streak."

The Kid shook his head and his frown deepened. "I was purty drunk. Things have always been mixed up when I try to remember. I know I didn't gun him. I met some feller in the trail before I come on Edwards. I don't remember meetin' Trobridge afterwards, but I was high-tailin' it so fast I mighta passed without seein' him."

Charlie nodded. "I reckon you did awright. He described that new yellow an' red neck-scarf you was wearin' at the dance . . . one he hadn't never seen before."

"I don't even know who the feller was I met fust," the Kid admitted dismally, "but I reckon he was the killer. Like I say, I was purty drunk till I come on Edwards layin' in the trail daid. That sobered me up plenty. Then I found out I'd lost my gun an' I got panicked. I figgered it was thereaboots somewheres, but I couldn't find it when I hunted. I was a damned fool, but all I could think of right then was gettin' acrost the Border . . . so I got."

"That wasn't so foolish," Charlie told him gravely. "More'n likely you'd been strung up if you'd stayed around." He shook his head and sighed deeply. "I don't see how you figgered you could prove yourself out of it by comin' back."

"If I could find out who that was I met on the trail I'd prove it," said the Kid grimly. "I thought I'd snoop around . . .

you an' me both . . . an' maybe after all this time the killer'd let somethin' slip, feelin' safe like he does, with all the blame on me."

"I can try my best," said Charlie doubtfully. "But this second killin' ties you right up in a knot, looks like."

"Why does it?" the Rio Kid scowled. "Don't nobody need know I was here tonight. I can hide out for a time."

Charlie's worried expression cleared somewhat. "I guess you can, at that. How about that line shack up in Hidden Valley where you an' me used to camp out on hunting trips when we were kids? I don't reckon anyone ever goes near there now."

"That'll be a good place. I can ride there tonight an' you can slip up an' bring me some grub tomorrow." The Kid hesitated and a shadow crossed his face. "I'd like mighty well to see Peggy first."

"Don't do it. Not till things're cleared up."

"You reckon . . . you think she . . . hates me?" asked the Rio Kid wistfully. For the moment all his defenses were down and he was no longer the two-gunned desperado of the Border. He was a young man hungering for the comforting news that his sister still believed in him, that her faith had been strong enough to endure for three years.

"Not that," Charlie assured him awkwardly. "It's only that . . . well . . . you know Peggy's got a mind of her own. And it ain't been easy on her with only old crippled Hank Greenow to help out. She's changed, Hugh. She ain't a little girl any more. She's thinner, and she's . . . she's turned hard, Hugh. I don't hardly feel like I know her any more."

The Rio Kid nodded. He covered his hurt and disappointment by stretching his arms and yawning. He glanced overhead at the moon and stars and muttered, "I'd better mosey along to Hidden Valley. I'll hole up at that old shack until you come to bring me some word. An' you'd better get outter here, too," he added harshly. "I know what can happen when a man gets too friendly with a corpse that's been shot through the back. 'Twouldn't do for you to tell why you were out here tonight."

He arose and held out his hand. Charlie gripped it tightly, stood there and watched him mount his black stallion and head northward into the mountains to the hidden shack which they had frequented as youngsters together.

CHAPTER IX

HENRY PELHAM sat comfortably in a straight chair tilted back against the wall of the tiny living room and through an open door into the kitchen approvingly watched Peggy fixing supper.

With her sleeves rolled up and her thin face warmly flushed by the heat of the roaring wood range, she made a pretty picture of domesticity.

With the proper clothes and a little more flesh on her bones she would grace any man's home, Henry Pelham told himself with satisfaction. She would take on the needed flesh soon enough after changing her diet from the sourdough biscuits, boiled frijoles and salt meat she was now preparing for supper; and he had the money to buy her all the clothes her heart could desire.

It would be a pleasure to spend money on Peggy—who had done without everything but the barest necessities of life these past few years. Pelham let his thoughts roam into the future with speculative pleasurableness. What a delight it would be to introduce this simple ranch girl to the cities with their big stores overflowing with the treasures of the earth; to witness her wide-eyed astonishment at the luxury of the hotels and dining cars.

He was glad that he would be able to give all those things to his wife, and her gratitude and happiness would be sufficient recompense—at first. Later, she would come to love him. He had no fear of the ultimate outcome of the projected marriage. He understood human nature and the ways of the world well enough to take his chances on love. In the years to come Peggy would look back upon tonight as the luckiest moment in her life. She would contrast the pleasant pampered ways of her new life with what might have been had she married some such fellow as Charlie Barnes, for instance, and would know she had made a wise decision.

Men like Charlie Barnes were all right—in their place, but Pelham had the good-natured contempt for them that every ruthlessly strong man has for the plodding failures of the world.

Peggy's voice brought him back from his

musings. She had opened the rear door and was calling Hank to supper from the bunkhouse. The time-honored call of the West: "Come and get it before I throw it out and wash the skillet."

Henry Pelham smiled and yawned. He'd keep old Hank Greenow on as foreman of the Triangle A, he decided. Hank was a good cowman of the old school. A loyal old fellow, too. He knew Hank hated and distrusted him, but the old fellow would come around all right. A little cash money would accomplish wonders with a crippled old codger like Hank. And Peggy would appreciate his generosity in keeping Hank on as foreman.

He heard Hank's footsteps coming from the bunkhouse. They stopped outside the kitchen door. Pelham couldn't hear what he said to Peggy, but he heard her pleading reply, "Please, Hank. Come on in to the table with us."

The only word he could distinguish in Hank's surly reply was his own name, but it was evidently a downright refusal to join them at the supper table, for Peggy turned away from the open door with drooping shoulders, and the flush had been driven from her face.

Henry Pelham arose and walked into the kitchen. Peggy had lifted a tin plate down from the shelf and was ladling out a generous helping of frijoles from the pot steaming on the range.

Pelham smiled indulgently as he entered the kitchen. "Let me speak to Hank. Perhaps I can persuade him he won't be contaminated if he eats supper with me."

Peggy darted him a frightened glance and shook her head vigorously, placing a warning finger on her lips.

But Pelham disregarded the signal and strode to the door. Hank glared at him without speaking, a dour, silent figure in the soft moonlight.

"HATING me isn't getting you anywhere," Pelham told the old man with bluff heartiness. "You only make Miss Aiken unhappy. Come on in, Hank, and bury the hatchet. I want to talk to you about my plans for building up the Triangle A. You'll still be in charge, of course."

Hank turned his head aside and spit into the dust. "I ain't got nothin' to talk over with you."

"Come on, now," Pelham urged good-naturedly. "I'm not poison even if I have made the Bar L pay while you've let the Triangle A run down. Let's be friends and plan for the future together." He stepped out with extended hand.

Hank glared at him and crossed his right arm across his chest, wiry fingers clenching the stump of his left arm.

"You ain't foolin' me none, Pelham," he snarled with concentrated venom. "You kin mebby pull the wool over a gal's eyes, but I weren't born yestiddy. I got a good idee of what goes on over to thuh Bar L, an' we ain't havin' none on thuh Triangle A. I'll thank you tuh git outta thuh way an' let Miss Peggy give me my supper."

"Please, Henry. Don't rile him up," Peggy's imploring voice sounded behind him.

He controlled his anger with an effort and stepped aside to let Peggy hand the irascible old foreman a plate of beans and salt pork with two sourdough biscuits soaking up the hot red juice.

The old man took the proffered plate and stamped away toward the bunkhouse. Peggy sighed deeply, and Pelham saw a glint of tears in her eyes as she turned back toward the kitchen door. He caught both her shoulders in his strong hands and turned her about to face him.

"Don't mind an old man like Hank. He's like all the rest of them hereabouts. They hate me because I've succeeded where they have failed. They'll change their tune in the years to come."

Peggy made a dismal attempt to smile reassurance, but it was a wretched failure. In a small choked voice she said, "I wouldn't care . . . if it was anybody but Hank. He's been so good to me." She pulled away from his grasp and re-entered the kitchen, dabbing at her misty eyes with the hem of her apron.

Henry Pelham followed her inside and sat at the well-scrubbed little kitchen table while she served him, without apology, from the scanty supply of food on hand.

It wasn't a cheerful meal, though Peggy tried her gallant best to divert their thoughts away from the subject that was uppermost in their minds.

Pelham maintained an outward joviality, though he was inwardly raging at old Hank's unfair attitude which had hurt the girl so deeply. He'd show them, by God. He'd show them all. He'd start buying up their damned run-down ranches and

turning them into pastures for Bar L stock. In a few years he'd control all the good grazing land in the vicinity, and they might keep on hating him for it, but by God they'd show him outward respect or he'd know the reason why.

He left Peggy soon after supper was finished. They couldn't find very much to talk about. He put his arm about her thin shoulders and kissed her tenderly on the lips, and she stood in the doorway and watched him ride away with a set hard look on her face.

She had felt no emotion when he kissed her. She felt nothing now. It seemed to her that she was drained of all capacity for emotion. Perhaps that was best, she told herself wisely. If one felt nothing it was difficult to be hurt. She could marry Henry Pelham now without regrets.

If only Charlie hadn't . . .

She swayed in the doorway and flung up a forearm to cover her eyes. She discovered that she hadn't wholly lost her capacity for emotion. Thinking of Charlie and how he had turned away from her this afternoon when she needed him most brought an acute pain that was almost beyond endurance. But she had been schooled to endure many things during the past three years, and she supposed she would learn to endure this pain in the years that lay ahead.

But she went to her lonely bed to toss sleeplessly for a long time, and then fell into troubled sleep wherein she had a nightmare that she was drowning in quicksand while Charlie Barnes stood on the bank with a coiled lariat in his hands and would not throw it out to save her. Far different from the happy dreams of most young girls the first night after they have become engaged.

HENRY PELHAM loosed his pent-up wrath on the horse beneath him when he was well away from the Triangle A. Savage curses dripped from his lips as he drove sharp rowels cruelly into the beast's sides. He had been a fool to humble himself by trying to placate Hank Greenow. The way to handle men like that was to ride over them rough-shod. Peggy, too. He had been unwontedly meek before her. What had it gotten him? Her lips had been cold and hard when she kissed him good night. She didn't even make any pretense that she cared for him. Sure, she had accepted his proposal of marriage, but she made it very clear it was only because of what he could give her. Well, that was all right, but by God in the end he'd break her spirit too. And again the rowels dug deep into flesh.

He rode up to the Bar L corrals at a headlong gallop, his face still flushed with sultry anger, and the old hostler came limping toward him excitedly as he flung himself from the back of his panting mount.

"That you, Mr. Pelham?"

"It's me. Put my horse up, Limpy."

The clubfoot stopped him as he started to turn away. "Jes' a minute, Mr. Pelham. I was jes' gonna tell you . . . Pat's horse jes' come in by hisself a few minutes back. I was headin' up to the bunkhouse to tell thuh boys . . ."

Pelham swung on him with a black frown. "Pat's horse? When? What do you mean?"

"His saddle horse, Mr. Pelham. The one he rode tonight. He went out with that Mex gal after supper. She come back twenty minutes ago alone, an' Pat's horse jes' come in without Pat. An' I heered a shot out yonder a little bit before she come ridin' back."

"A shot, eh? And Pat's horse came back without him? What Mexican girl, Limpy?"

"That purty new un. Tonita, her name is."

"God damn Pat," raged the Bar L owner. "I told him to stay away from those Mexican girls. The sheriff went soft on Tonita today, and I figured . . ." He cut himself short, his voice suddenly going harsh, "Rout the men out of the bunkhouse and tell them to saddle up. I'll have a talk with that girl."

"There's somethin' else I reckon you oughtta know," Limpy said hesitantly. "That new man you hired . . . he rode out, too, an' ain't showed up yet."

"Charlie Barnes?"

"Dunno his name. Heavy-sot feller . . . not packin' no guns."

"And he hasn't come back either? Damn Pat and him both. I can't afford to have any trouble around here. Get the boys out, Limpy. I'll . . ."

He was interrupted by a gruff shout from beyond the corral. He and Limpy turned and stared at the bulky figure of the Bar L foreman limping painfully toward them in his high-heeled boots that weren't built for walking.

Pelham's angry frown deepened and he

demanded curtly, "What's been happening around here, Pat?"

Pat essayed a painful grin as he hobbled up. "That danged Mex spitfire pulled a fast one on me. When I stepped off my haws to invite her down fer a little lovin' she stampeded my haws an' spurred her own off, leavin' me to hoof it back. Wait'll I git my hands on her ag'in."

"Damn you and your lallygagging," Pelham exploded. "You know we can't have anything like that around here. I've warned you men time and again that there's to be no trouble. Limpy heard a shot. What was it?"

"A shot? Yeh, I . . . I heard it, too, Boss." Pat pulled out a dirty bandanna and nervously mopped his swarthy face, avoiding Pelham's angry eyes.

"Well, what was it?" Pelham snapped.

Pat mumbled, "I'll tell you, Boss, it was this way. I heard that shot too, right after the gal an' my haws quit me sudden-like. It come from close by an' . . . Boss, you shore ain't gonna like this . . ."

"Not going to like what? Damn it! Speak up, man." Pelham caught the foreman's burly shoulder and shook him angrily.

"You ain't gonna like what's layin' out yonder. It's . . . that sheriff that ain't dry behind the ears yet. That Edwards kid. He's deader'n a stuck pig. Shot through the back."

"Les Edwards? Dead? What are you talking about? Who did it?"

"Danged if I know," Pat disclaimed. "He was layin' there when I found him. That gal, mebbe. She's hell on wheels, I'm tellin' you."

"That," said Pelham bitterly, "isn't going to make it any better." He narrowed his hot eyes at Pat. "Let me see your guns."

The foreman hesitated, started to refuse. His air of bravado vanished when a change came over Pelham, when his hands clawed down toward the .45's in his holsters and his voice came in a thin trickle like icy water seeping through a frozen aperture: "Give me your guns."

"Yeh. Well . . . shore, Boss, shore." Pat lifted them awkwardly with his fingertips, reversed them and shoved the butts toward Pelham while his eyes cringed from the deadly gaze that bored into his.

Pelham took them and put first one muzzle and then the other to his nose and sniffed deeply. His expression was unchanged, cold and merciless, when he handed them back. "One of your guns has been shot. So you gunned the sheriff, Pat. You met him out there and quarreled about Tonita. God damn your soul to hell. I ought to blast your guts. . . ."

"Wait, Boss. Lemme tell you. There's another feller out there, too. Mebbe we kin hang the killin' on him." Pat's face was pasty with fear and he was panting.

"Oh yes. Charlie Barnes?" Pelham arched his heavy brows at Limpy. "But Charlie was unarmed."

"He was when he come, Boss. But when he rid out later he hadda gun strapped aroun' his belly. I seen it. He musta brorrowed one from some of thuh boys."

"Charlie Barnes?" Pelham mused. A cruel smile twitched his lips. "Sure. Why not? Then the Bar L can't be blamed . . ."

"I reckon that's him ridin' in now," Limpy whispered tensely, indicating the approach of a lone rider.

Pelham nodded. "All right," he told Pat curtly. "You witnessed the killing. You can swear to it. When we take that gunbelt off him, you buckle it on you in place of the one you used on Edwards. That'll hang him sure. Doc Conroy has a newfangled way of telling what gun a bullet was shot from, and if they test the bullet in Edwards it'll fit the gun in Barnes' belt. Take it easy now, and we'll grab him."

Charlie Barnes rode up to the little group unsuspectingly. He nodded and said, "Howdy," then stepped down off his roan. His lower jaw sagged open when Pelham drew both guns and covered him with a single lightning-fast movement.

He grated, "We don't like killers on the Bar L payroll, Barnes. Not sheriff-killers. Unbuckle his gun-belt, Pat. We're taking him in to jail."

CHAPTER X

AFTER Hank Greenow had sopped up the last spoonful of bean juice with a piece of biscuit and slowly devoured the savory morsel, he pushed back the tin plate from in front of him and got out a stubby corncob pipe and a tin of coarse tobacco. By setting the pipe in front of him on the table and resting the stump of his left arm on the stem, he poured and tamped a load of tobacco in the blackened bowl.

When it was lit and drawing well he turned out the bunkhouse lamp and went

to the doorway, where he settled his lean old body on the threshold for a long vigil.

His seamed face indicated nothing of his thoughts as he sat there sucking on his pipe, occasionally glancing toward the ranch house, where curtained kitchen windows glowed with light from within.

He was a lonely, and somehow a pathetic figure as he sat there on the threshold hunched over his corncob pipe. An old man is always a pathetic figure when he has passed the zenith of life and feels things slipping away from his grip. An uncompromising realist, Hank knew that matters had finally come to a showdown. Peggy couldn't stand much more. She had already stood too much during these past three years. He had stood by and watched the prettiness and vivacity fade from her face, had seen the rounded flesh of young womanhood turn to stringy muscles, had witnessed the acknowledgment of defeat dull the eyes that had been bright and sparkling with happiness only a few years previously.

For months now, Hank had stood aside silently and watched Henry Pelham ride to the Triangle A more and more frequently. Tonight was the first time old Hank had committed an overt act to indicate his disapproval of the growing intimacy between Peggy and the Bar L owner.

But today Hank had made a discovery that changed a lot of things. The showdown was coming sooner than he had hoped for. Tonight, perhaps.

He had knocked the sizzling dottle from his pipe and refilled it three times when he heard the front door of the ranch house open. He could hear the murmur of Peggy's voice as she told her visitor good night. He sat alone in the darkness and his old eyes glowed queerly when the sound of Henry Pelham's galloping horse faded away into the night-silence.

Still he did not change his hunched posture on the threshold of the bunkhouse. He sucked on his pipe and watched while the kitchen lights went out and a faint glow from Peggy's bedroom window told him the girl was preparing for bed.

Soon that light, too, disappeared and the Triangle A ranch lay in complete darkness.

Hank reloaded his pipe for the fourth time, and carefully shielded the match flame from any eyes that might be watching for a sign that all was not exactly as usual at the Triangle A. Not that he actually suspected the presence of an unseen watcher in the darkness, but the imminence of action made him acutely alert to any possible danger. If he had been seen that afternoon when he made his startling discovery there might well be those who would spy upon him to see what, if anything, he was going to do about it.

He patiently smoked his fourth pipe out, then knocked the cob bowl against the edge of the step with a gesture of decision. Peggy should be asleep by this time. There was nothing to delay him further.

He needed no light to find his gun-belt inside the dark bunkhouse. A one-handed job of buckling it about his waist was somewhat difficult, and it was for that reason as much as anything else that he seldom wore a gun nowadays—that, and because there had been nothing to fight back at until tonight.

His short saddle-gun rested in its leather boot upon two nails driven into the wall above his bunk. He lifted it down lovingly, drew it from its scabbard and experimented with the awkwardness of aiming and firing one-armed. By supporting the muzzle with the stump of his left arm he found he could handle the lever action effectively. He nodded grimly to himself as he slid the .30 caliber weapon back into its boot. Old and crippled he might be, but by God he could still throw lead with either rifle or hand-gun. He figured there was one more good fight left in his old carcass, and tonight would be as good a time as any to prove it.

He went out of the bunkhouse and strode directly to the corral, where he had penned his horse after unsaddling him that evening. He rested the rifle against an outside rail, shook a loop into a short catch-rope and stepped inside the corral with the coils hugged against his body with his left arm.

The single horse in the pen snorted and shied away from him in the moonlight, and Hank made a short toss that snagged the loop securely about the animal's neck. He led him out and tossed his rigging on, buckled his carbine and leather boot under the left stirrup leather with butt forward so he could draw the rifle while still mounted. He swung into the saddle and made a wide circle around the ranch house so Peggy wouldn't awaken and hear him.

Once well away from the triangle of cottonwoods he lifted his mount into a steady distance-devouring lope, pushing him east and a little north, skirting the broken foothills for mile after mile until turning sharply north into a wide canyon that led directly upward into the mountainous country.

For the first half mile the floor of the canyon was wide and level, though it climbed upward rapidly. Then the steep walls began crowding in and the course became narrower and more precipitous. The stubble grass gave way to bare rocky stretches strewn with boulders washed down in spring freshets, and Hank was forced to slow to a trot to give his tiring mount a chance to pick a path around the frequent obstructions.

It grew noticeably colder as they climbed upward, and the slanting rays of moonlight no longer reached the bottom of the sheer-sided gulch that cut on into the heart of the mountains.

At a point where a narrow ravine cut a sharp path in the right wall of the main canyon, Hank pulled his horse into the cut and urged him up over the rim at a fearfully steep slant.

Slipping precariously and sliding back when his foothold gave way, the animal lunged on under the urging of Hank's voice and spurs, driving on out over the top of the canyon wall, lathered and spent and trembling in every limb.

Hank pulled him up to let him blow, his keen old eyes searching ahead down the long slope that lay beyond, drawn like a magnet by the lighted windows of a cabin that gleamed upward from the bottom of the next valley.

HE nodded with grim satisfaction at the sight. He had been right, then. Hidden Valley was no longer hidden and deserted. Passing this way by chance that afternoon he had made the accidental discovery that had brought him; in the dark of night, back up a trail known only to himself.

He was coldly alert now as he reined his horse to the right along the top of the ridge that led into one of the tunnel ends enclosing the small oval-shaped valley that took its name from the fact that it could be reached only through two narrow and tortuous passages; one of them leading up from the east boundary of the Bar L, and the other climbing out northward into the much-traveled road through Bloody Gap from which one could ride on into the interior of the state or turn sharply south into the dangerous stretch of desert country leading to the Border and Mexico.

Hank let his mount pick his way along the top of the ridge at a walk so their progress would be as silent as possible as approach was made to a commanding position overlooking the narrow entry from the south.

From the valley floor below, the muted lowing of cattle drifted upward on the wings of a night-breeze. He had sighted the herd being held in Hidden Valley this afternoon, and it was their presence that had brought him back tonight. This section of the mountains had never been grazed since a rancher named Dooley had tried it twenty years before and had his entire herd wiped out in an early fall blizzard that blocked both exits. There were numerous small guarded meadows of rich grass like Hidden Valley, but they were so widely separated and so difficult to reach that no one had repeated Dooley's mistake of trying to graze them.

Yet, here was an unannounced herd in Hidden Valley, and the long-unused cabin below held human occupants. Hank knew he would have heard about it if some newcomer had decided to repeat Dooley's disastrous experiment, and the fact that the herd was being held there secretly meant only one thing to the old man who'd spent the best part of his lift combating Border rustlers. He was convinced it was stolen stuff awaiting a chance to be slipped across the Border, and he had his own suspicions about the identity of the rustlers. It was to confirm those suspicions that he now took up his lonely vigil half-way down the slope of the southern bottle-neck leading out of the valley.

The passageway three hundred yards below was only wide enough to permit two horses abreast, and was brightly lighted wtih moonlight streaking through the gap.

He dismounted and tied his horse to a sapling, drew his carbine from its boot and selected a flat rock overlooking the entrance in the sheltering shadow of a group of stunted pines. He laid the short rifle across his knees and settled himself to wait patiently. Sooner or later someone would attempt to pass in or out of that narrow gap below him. Until that happened he

was prepared to play a waiting game, without even the solace of his corncob pipe which might betray his presence to some rustler riding nightguard on the herd in the valley.

After leaving Charlie Barnes standing beside the corpse of Les Edwards, the Rio Kid changed from his northerly course to ride eastward toward the gate leading out of the Bar L range through which he had recently ridden. It was a little more direct route to Hidden Valley to ride northward, but he had already smashed the padlock on the gate to get in, and he decided he might as well ride out the same way and then skirt the eastern boundary fence to reach the narrow mountain pass he sought.

He shook his head and frowned at the vague uneasiness that laid hold of him as he let Thunderbolt have his head up the long slope. He didn't like Charlie's evasiveness about Peggy. His old friend was holding something back from him. Why didn't he want Hugh to visit his sister at once? The fact that she had been having a hard time of it in his absence didn't make a good reason for him to stay away now. Wouldn't his presence reassure her that her struggle to keep things going was at an end?

The Kid was strongly tempted to disregard Charlie's advice and turn Thunderbolt toward the Triangle A despite everything. He had to fight down the strong impulse by reminding himself of the need for caution. The need was doubly strong now—after Les Edwards' murder. More important than anything else was to hide the fact that the Rio Kid had returned tonight—had been riding the Bar L range when young Edwards was murdered.

He regretfully decided against trying to see Peggy at once. It would only make it harder on her if she knew about his return and had to keep it a secret.

The black stallion thundered up to the crest of the ridge, and the Kid saw the iron gates swinging open in front of him just as he had left them. He decided there wasn't any use advertising the fact that a stranger had shot off the lock and ridden through tonight, so he stopped and pulled the gates shut, looped the chain around them and hooked the useless padlock through two links so it would appear to any casual observer who didn't inspect it closely that the gate was tightly locked.

He was just straightening in the saddle after finishing that task when he heard a horse trotting down the outside of the fence toward him.

The rider was so close that the Kid knew he must have seen him closing the gate, so he made no attempt to avoid the meeting, but waited for the other to come up, with one hand resting lightly on the butt of a gun against possible recognition.

The rider tossed out a cheerful, "Howdy," as he drew near, then leaned forward and peered at the Kid, asking doubtfully, "That you, Mart?"

The Kid said, "No. This ain't Mart," and waited to see what would happen.

"Yeh. I see it ain't," the stranger responded, reining up close in front of him. "Them two guns fooled me. But I reckon all you Bar L riders got a need to pack two guns, huh?" He threw back his head and laughed raucously, showing a pock-marked face and a wide gap in his lower front teeth.

"How d'you know I'm a Bar L rider?" the Kid growled.

"'Cause I saw you comin' through that gate an' lockin' it behind you. Nobody but Bar L men has got keys, have they?"

THE Kid hesitated, then agreed with a thin smile, "No. I reckon yo're right."

"No use us wastin' time standin' here palaverin'," the other said briskly. "Boss sent me down to see why one of you didn't come last night. Might's well get started."

"Where?" the Kid grunted.

The other looked at him in surprise. "You're headed for Hidden Valley, ain't you?"

Taken completely by surprise, the Kid said, "Yes," before he had time to catch himself.

"Well then, what we waitin' for?" The other wheeled his horse about to retrace his trail. The Rio Kid ranged forward beside him, his thoughts in a confused whirl. Now, what the blazes was the meaning of this? Why should someone be expecting him in Hidden Valley? Had Charlie deliberately planned to send him into a trap?

No. It couldn't be Charlie's fault. This man thought he was a Bar L rider. But why would a Bar L rider be expected in Hidden Valley? Expected by whom?

Everywhere he turned tonight the Kid was confronted with another dilemma. If

Hidden Valley wasn't deserted as he and Charlie thought, it wouldn't make a very good hideout for him. Yet, that was the only way he had of making contact with Charlie. He felt utterly helpless as he rode along beside the pock-marked man without speaking. What the hell would it all lead to? What was the sinister secret of the Bar L that called for heavy fences and locked iron gates—and sent their riders out on secret rendezvous in the night?

The other rider began talking in jerky phrases as they loped along side by side. "My name's Jenkins. You're new at the Bar L, I reckon?"

"Yep. From down Texas-way." The Kid intentionally broadened his drawl and tried to give it a Texas twang. "Mostly they call me the Kid back in the Big Bend."

"Big Bend, huh?" Jenkins nodded knowingly. "That's a hell of a good country to be from, 'cordin' to what I've heard tell."

The Kid said carefully, "I reckon mebby I'll like it here in Arizony.

"Shore you will. Shore enuff. Action a-plenty an' no lack of money, an' plenty of red whisky an' gals to spend it on." Jenkins guffawed appreciatively, showing the gap in his front teeth that gave him the appearance of an imbecile when he laughed.

"This here Hidden Valley," said the Kid, feeling his way along, "I ain't been up there before."

"She's a sweet leetle layout. Sweet as a gal's fust kiss in the spring. Been workin' it for more'n three years now, an' ain't nobody suspects what's goin' on a-tall."

"Three years," the Kid echoed sharply. "That's a long time."

"I'll say it is, but we take it easy, see? Don't rush things an' cause a ruckus that gets questions asked. This way, it's safe as hell, an' ain't no reason why it cain't go on for three-four more years without no one gettin' wiser."

"That's smart."

"You bet it is. The Boss is plenty smart. He don't never tip his hand. Up yonder ahaid is where we cut into the mountains. Bar L range ends at this corner of the fence an' there ain't no more ranches along the way. Grass ain't wuth a damn this high up, 'cept in pockets like Hidden Valley."

The Rio Kid nodded without answering. What would Jenkins say if he admitted he knew this terrain inside and out.

Up that canyon there on the right was where he and Charlie had treed a bob-cat when he was twelve years old. They'd shot all their .22 bullets at the big cat without dislodging him from his perch, and Charlie had ridden into the Triangle A to get Hank Greenow and his gun while Hugh stayed behind to keep the cat treed.

A rush of boyhood memories came to him and brought a choking sensation in his throat. This narrowing trail he now rode with Jenkins had been regarded by Charlie and him as their own private back road. Even back in those days no one ever rode it except a couple kids finding high adventure in the stillness and solitude of camping out in Hidden Valley where they could pretend they were pioneers and the only whites in a country infested by hostile Indian tribes.

BLOODY Gap, the only other exit from the valley, had gotten its name from an Indian massacre that had occurred there back in 1832 to a wagon train from El Paso that had gotten lost in the Arizona mountains.

Around here some place—yes, just ahead where that lightning-struck lone pine was silhouetted against the moonlit sky—was where Hugh's pony had thrown him once when they met a black bear unexpectedly blocking the trail. As Thunderbolt carried him swiftly past the remembered spot the Kid relived the terror of that moment while he lay helplessly in the trail with a sprained ankle and waited for the bear to lunge on him.

Bruin hadn't, of course. He had meandered on down the trail in his leisurely manner, paying not the slightest attention to the frightened lad at his mercy.

The steep wooded walls of the narrow canyon were closing in on the rider now. The night air had the chill of the higher altitude, but it was clean and good in the Kid's lungs. He and Jenkins galloped on together easily, and his companion pointed ahead to a tiny gap in the high wall of the mountain above them.

"Yonder's where we top out into the valley. She's blocked with snow eight months out of the year, but the valley's pertected on four sides an' don't freeze up bad."

How well the Rio Kid knew that. He and Charlie had got trapped by an early snowfall once, forced to remain two weeks

alone in the cold whiteness of the valley until the warm sun of Indian summer melted the snow on the summit sufficiently for them to push through. Their supplies had run low but there had been a plentitude of snowshoe rabbits for the killing. There had been a feeling of high exaltation in being trapped in the mountain wilderness and forced to depend upon their guns for food to survive. He could still recall their regret when the snow melted and let them out.

He and Jenkins were nearing the top of the long steep climb now. Jenkins' shaggy horse was panting loudly and faltering in his stride, but the rhythm of Thunderbolt's smooth fluid motion beneath the Kid was unbroken even though he had traveled more than fifty miles since sunrise that morning.

Jenkins relaxed loosely in the saddle with a little sigh of relief when they reached the summit. "Downhill all the way now," he announced. "See them lights in the cabin down below."

An instinct inside the Rio Kid warned him of an unseen and unfriendly presence on the slope above. Perhaps it was the click of the hammer of Hank Greenow's gun, or a dislodged pebble beneath the old man's boot-heel, but it was enough to cause him to lean low in the saddle and send Thunderbolt lunging ahead while he whipped out both guns and fired up the slope whence the warning of danger had come.

The crash of his two guns was echoed simultaneously by a thunderous report from above, and angry flame lanced downward at the two riders.

The Kid holstered his guns and jerked Thunderbolt up sharply when no second shot came from the slope.

Cursing luridly, Jenkins pulled his own mount up, shouting, "What the hell, Kid? What's happenin'?"

"Looks like we was laid for up yonder," the Kid said dryly, one hand still gripping the butt of a gun while his suspicious eyes searched Jenkins' face. "Shore you don't know nothin' about it?"

"Hell no. How'd I know? Gawd, that was fast work with yore guns. Reckon you got him?"

"I reckon," said the Rio Kid phlegmatically. "I don't gen'ally miss at that range. Hol' yore haws quiet a minute an' listen."

They both quieted their horses and strained their ears for some sound from their would-be ambusher up the slope. A faint groan came to them, then stillness.

The Kid stepped lithely from the saddle and dropped Thunderbolt's reins. "Reckon I'll take me a look-see."

Jenkins swung off behind him and followed up the slope a few paces in his rear.

The Kid climbed cautiously, gave a low grunt of satisfaction when he glimpsed the figure of a man writhing in gun-shot agony in the shadow of a clump of pines.

He stooped over the body and found himself staring unbelievingly into the seamed features of Hank Greenow.

Hank's teeth were drawn away from his lips and he stared back with grim hatred.

His eyes widened and his expression changed. He opened his set teeth and a bloody froth bubbled out with the exhalation of a single word: "Hugh!"

His head fell back and wrinkled lids came down over his eyes to hide them. His mouth went lax and more bubbles of bloody froth appeared on his lips.

CHAPTER XI

JENKINS CAME panting up the slope behind the Rio Kid as he dropped to his knees beside old Hank Greenow and felt for his wound.

"Got him, huh?" Jenkins exclaimed triumphantly. He peered over the Kid's shoulder at Hank who now lay relaxed and quiet. "It's that ol' codger from the Triangle A spread," he muttered. "Howcome him to be hidin' out up here, you reckon?"

"How the hell should I know?" The Kid rocked back on his heels, staring down at Hank's lined face. The Kid's hand was sticky with blood from a bullet hole through the old man's chest. He shuddered and tried to wipe it dry on a tuft of grass.

"Know him, don't you?" Jenkins queried with a subtle change in his manner. He drew back a little, squatting on the hillside with one hand close to his gun, his gaze queerly alert and guarded.

The Kid tensed and a warning instinct rippled through him. Even in that awful moment of agonized sorrow, with old Hank dying before his eyes, the instinct of the hunted came to his aid. He knew he had to be careful. Jenkins' suspicions had been aroused by something. One tiny slip might be fatal. Had Jenkins heard Hank call him by name before he slid into his coma?

Would the man put two and two together, recalling the old story of Hugh Aiken who had fled across the Border from the Triangle A years ago?

He answered Jenkins' question in a steady, deliberate voice, "What makes you think I know him?"

"'Count of what he said when he first saw you. I heard him plain with my own ears. He said, 'you,' an' then passed out 'fore he could say any more."

Relief flooded through the Rio Kid. His identity wasn't exposed—yet. Jenkins had mistaken Hank's pronunciation of his name for "you." He fitted his reply to Jenkins' interpretation of what he had heard.

He nodded. "Can't say I really know him. Met him today an' we talked a little. He acted s'prised tuh see me here tonight."

"He knowed you were ridin' for the Bar L, I reckon?" Jenkins' vigilance relaxed a trifle at the Kid's easy explanation.

"Yeh. I reckon he knowed that."

"That's how-come he said 'you' surprised like." Jenkins nodded sagely. He removed his hand from his gun-butt, all his quick suspicion dissipated. He chuckled, "He couldn't figger what a Bar L rider'd be doin' here in Hidden Valley." He leaned forward to peer down at Hank's ashen face, asking with casual interest, "Is he dead or just possumin'?"

"Neither, I don't think. But he won't live long 'less we get him to a sawbones quick. I plugged him through the lungs."

"Good shootin'." Jenkins nodded approvingly. "Plumb what the ol' fool deserved for sneakin' up here at night an' layin' in wait for us. What you talkin' about a sawbones for? Lemme knock him in the head just to make shore he's finished an' we'll leave him lay here."

Inwardly, the Kid recoiled at his companion's monstrous proposal. But he hid his true feelings, putting up a bluff as coolly as though he backed a pair of deuces against three aces at a poker table. "That don't make sense," he protested. "Looks to me like we had oughtta keep him alive an' ask him some questions . . . find out who else knows he was comin' here tonight . . . jest how much he knows an' who he's told about it."

Jenkins slapped his thigh and nodded. "That's smart thinkin'. Shore, we better not leave him layin' here daid. You reckon a doc could bring him around so's he could talk?"

"I dunno," the Rio Kid responded truthfully. "He's shot bad."

Jenkins sprang to his feet, assuming charge. "His haws is tied back here. We'll load him on an' take him in to camp. If he's still alive when we get there, somebody can ride to Bloody Gap for Doc Conroy. Catch Conroy halfway sober an' he's as good at pluggin' up bullet holes as any man in Arizona."

Doctor Conroy? The Kid remembered him vaguely from his boyhood. A bluff red-faced Irishman who believed the human system could subsist for long intervals on alcohol in lieu of food and who had dedicated himself to proving his pet theory. An able surgeon when, as Jenkins said, he could be caught halfway sober.

The Kid nodded agreement. If Doc Conroy had taken up his abode in Bloody Gap it was certain that most of his practice consisted in plugging up bullet holes. He suggested to Jenkins: "Lead his haws over here an' we'll tie him into the saddle."

He bent over Hank Greenow again while Jenkins climbed the slope to the sapling where Hank had tied his horse. The old man's eyes were closed and he looked at peace. His breathing was steady and unlabored. The Kid got out his bandanna and made a thick pad which he placed over the wound in Hank's chest to check further external bleeding. He could do nothing to stop the internal flow. He knew the old man was badly wounded but he also knew the toughness of his fiber. He had seen other men with similar holes in their chests live to get over it.

WHAT accident had brought Hank here tonight—this one night of all nights? Or had it been an accident? He recalled Charlie's evasiveness while discussing conditions at the Triangle A. Did that have anything to do with what was going on here in Hidden Valley? He hadn't been able to get much real information out of Jenkins yet, and he couldn't afford to tip his hand at this stage of the game by asking direct questions.

What had Jenkins meant by his chuckling assertion that Hank had been astonished to see him because he couldn't figure what a Bar L rider would be doing there?

He got a firm grip on Hank's shoulders and stood up, dragging the old foreman's lax body erect as Jenkins led the horse up. Together, they settled Hank belly-down

across the saddle, and looped a rope from dangling arms and legs underneath the animal.

While he worked swiftly with one part of his mind actively engaged with the problem before him, the Rio Kid's gaze kept straying to that old familiar brand on the horse's left thigh—a large A inside of a larger triangle. It was as though the brand were burning itself into his brain, as though it were searing itself there for all time to come. First the son of Sheriff Edwards, and now Hank Greenow—on the first night of his return. What terrible curse rode with him; what had he done to deserve this fate when all he asked was a chance to prove his innocence of a crime he hadn't committed?

A black wrath slowly took possession of his lean frame as he led the Triangle A horse down the hillside with the body of Hank Greenow tied securely in the saddle. If there were only something he could fight back at; some human agency on which he could vent his futile anger!

He and Jenkins mounted in the trail where they'd left their horses, and the Kid looped the end of the lead-rope over his saddlehorn. He knew the jolting ride down to the lighted cabin in the valley would probably finish Hank off, but that was a chance that had to be taken. It was the least he could do for the old man who had been like a second father to him in his youth.

He lifted Thunderbolt into a gallop down the long steep slope, and Jenkins ranged forward beside him on his rested mount. The led horse snorted and balked at the unfamiliar feel of a rope dragging him forward, but had to follow at a lope or be chocked by the slip-knot about his neck.

When they reached the floor of the valley Jenkins gestured ahead toward a small bunch of cattle in the moonlight. "There they are," he shouted above the drum of twelve galloping hooves. "You ain't got time to stop and look 'em over now, but you can see for yourself when you get time. Three hundred head scattered through the valley an' nary a blotched hide among 'em."

He spoke with great pride in his voice, and the Kid squinted at the herd as they thundered past, striving to guess the secret of their presence here in Hidden Valley.

Looked like all young stuff, as near as he could see. Yearlings, if the shimmery moonlight didn't deceive him. About half and half heifers and steers, he decided, all comfortably sleek and in better condition than most stock wintered in that part of Arizona.

What was it Tonita had said about the new owner of the Bar L hiring Mexicans to work in his hay-field? Cutting summer hay for winter feed? Could that be the answer to the way this stuff had wintered? But it couldn't be Bar L stock. From the remarks Jenkins had made he was certain it was some sort of rustling scheme.

Then he saw a Bar L brand on a fat yearling near the road as they passed. A clean unmarred brand burned into the animal's hide. He sucked in his breath sharply and had all he could do to repress an exclamation of amazement. He watched carefully and saw another calf and then another bearing the same brand—and he could see no other markings on their smooth hides.

If this was stolen Bar L stuff, why was he, supposed to be a Bar L rider, invited out to inspect them? This was the greatest mystery of all, yet it partially explained Jenkins' remark back at the pass when he thought Hank was surprised to see a Bar L rider entering Hidden Valley.

It didn't make sense—unless Pelham's own riders were helping rustle his stuff—and it was presumed he was one of those in on it. But if it was rustled Bar L stuff, why hadn't they been run directly across the Border instead of being brought up here? The only way to reach the Border from Hidden Valley was back down the trail past the Bar L again; or beyond on the road through Bloody Gap and thence southward over the desert trail where there were few waterholes and it was a difficult dangerous job to move cattle except in the very early spring before the summer heat had dried up the streams.

It sure didn't make sense any way you looked at it. Charlie had mentioned that Henry Pelham was doing well on the Bar L, unbothered by rustlers. And Jenkins had said he and the others had been working this scheme for three years.

The more you looked at every angle, the more incredible and impossible it appeared. But they were nearing the lighted cabin now, and the Kid switched his thoughts from the puzzle of the Bar L branded stock to the more immediate danger that confronted him. He didn't know who

would be there at the cabin. If there were any who recognized him he might have to start shooting in a hurry.

When they pulled up in front of the aged log cabin that had been the scene of so much happiness in his youth, the Kid leaped off Thunderbolt and hurried back to Hank. The old fellow was still unconscious, but breathing feebly. Jenkins helped him untie the rope, and they carried him between them to the closed door of the cabin where Jenkins shouted loudly and kicked on the door.

After a little wait the door was opened by a bulky figure who wavered in the rectangle of yellow light on unsteady feet, peering out at them from a growth of shaggy black whiskers.

"Drunk again," Jenkins said acidly. "Get back outta the door, Sam, so's we can bring this feller in."

Sam stepped back, steadying himself with a hand on the doorknob. He mumbled, "You bin long enuff gittin' back, Jenks," then swayed back and seated himself heavily in a cane-bottomed chair in front of a small table holding a litter of playing cards and poker chips, with a gallon jug of whisky sitting in the exact center.

Jenkins snorted his disgust as he entered ahead of the Kid and led the way to a stack of filthy bedding in one corner, where they laid the old man down.

THERE was a second occupant of the cabin sitting at the table opposite Sam. He was dark-featured, with the facial characteristics of an Indian, but with sandy hair and incongruous eyes of light blue. His thin lips twisted in a sneer as they followed Jenkins and the Kid with their burden.

"What'd you do, Jenks? Pick a fight with some wanderin' waddie you met up with? The Boss ain't gonna like that."

Jenkins straightened from laying Hank down. Through compressed lips he observed, "If you'd lay off your whisky diet you wouldn't make cracks like that." He jerked a thumb toward the Rio Kid. "Meet the Kid, ridin' for the Bar L. Slickest gunhombre I ever met up with . . . bar none."

The half-breed's eyes took on a tinge of yellow and began to glow queerly. His sneer widened. The Kid realized he was so full of whisky his back teeth were probably floating, but he was the kind of man who never showed his drunkenness outwardly.

"Purty slick with his guns, huh?" sneered the breed. "Mebby he'll get a chance to prove how fast he is."

"Be tough on you if you push him to it," Jenkins warned unemotionally. He gestured toward Hank Greenow, related how the old man had tried to bushwhack them on the pass and the manner in which the Kid had thrown lead directly to the mark in the illusive moonlight without even a target to aim at. "An' that's shootin' in any man's language," he ended emphatically.

"Lucky, more-like," sneered the breed. He transferred his surly gaze to Hank's unconscious body. "What'd you bring him in for? The coyotes'd've cleaned his bones slick if you'd left him lay up there."

"One of us is ridin' for Doc Conroy," Jenkins said incisively. "We figger to keep him alive long enough to make him talk . . . find out what he knows . . . how come he was layin' for us to come back."

The Rio Kid moved backward, lounging easily against the wall with both his hands swinging free. He was aware of an atmosphere of deadly hostility inside the cabin, and he couldn't tell how much of it was directed at him and how much at Jenkins who appeared to be in charge. Both the bearded Sam and the half-breed wore holstered guns, but the breed was the real menace. It was evident he was in a nasty mood, just drunk enough to force the issue against anyone he turned against.

When Jenkins finished speaking, the breed snarled, "The Boss ain't gonna like us ridin' for Conroy."

"He won't care if he knows why," Jenkins argued. The Kid noted keenly that his voice was losing its force under the yellowish glare from the breed's vicious eyes. Beads of sweat stood on his forehead and he was beginning to adopt a placating attitude.

"I say no!" the breed snarled. He thumped a muscular fist on the table. Sunken trenches appeared on his lean cheeks as hard muscles corded there. He was working himself up into a killing rage, and the Kid knew that Jenkins was afraid of him.

Sam gathered up the deck of dirty cards in his big hands and nervously began shuffling them. He mumbled drunkenly, "Lesh play poker an' have 'nother li'le drink. 'Nother li'le drink never did nobody no

harm." A broad smile spread over his bearded face as he reached for the jug.

"You boys go ahead with your game," Jenkins said quickly. "Me an' the Kid'll ride to Bloody Gap . . ."

"I ain't shore that the Kid'll be ridin' nowhere." The breed transferred his venomous gaze to the Rio Kid who still leaned against the wall. His yellow-tinged eyes were unblinking, reptilian.

The Kid laughed shortly. "I ain't askin' you can I or can't I." He shrugged and turned his gaze to Jenkins. "You comin' with me or stayin' here?"

"You can't go alone," Jenkins reminded him. "Bein' a stranger here . . ."

"I reckon I can find the road to Bloody Gap."

"I say no." The breed kicked back his chair and stood up. "Let that old man die."

Hank writhed just then, and moaned in pain.

The Kid folded his arms and said in a low deliberate monotone, "To hell with you, breed. . . ."

When that insulting word left his lips the other went for his gun.

The Kid slammed one hand down hard on the butt of his holstered gun, swiveling the muzzle upward and thumbing the hammer in a single motion.

The small room reverberated with the crash of his .45. The breed swayed on his feet, still tugging to get his gun free, shot through the belly and numbed by the terrific impact of the heavy slug.

The Kid laughed softly. With his holstered gun still tilted at his hip he fired again and a round hole appeared as if by magic in the center of the breed's forehead.

He toppled forward slowly, as though unwilling to the end to admit defeat, and his stringy frame made a dull thud as it struck the floor. His limbs twitched, and then he was still.

The Rio Kid said, "There's one that won't be needin' Doc Conroy." He glanced toward Jenkins. "You ridin' with me?"

"God'l'mighty! The Boss shore ain't gonna like this," Jenkins muttered. "That's Half-Breed Joe you killed. Sixteen notches in the butt of his gun."

"Half-Breed Joe?" The Kid scowled. He tilted his head and a far-away look came into his eyes. He frowned and started to reply, then his expression cleared. He recalled now where he had heard that name before—in connection with another name he had heard this evening for the first time in years. The name of Henry Pelham hadn't jogged his memory, but the two of them in conjunction brought it all back clearly. It just made the whole enigma worse, however.

Hank Greenow moaned again. The Kid made a decisive gesture as though to brush away all the questions bothering him. They would have to wait until later, until he had time to add some things up and see what they totaled. He turned to the door, saying:

"I better go with you," Jenkins decided reluctantly, following him out. "Have to see the Boss an' tell him about Half-Breed Joe . . . an' he shore ain't gonna like it one little bit."

CHAPTER XII

THE Rio Kid was on the trail out of Hidden Valley with Jenkins before he fully realized what this trip to Bloody Gap might mean to him. Under the stress of his anxiety over Hank Greenow he had completely forgotten that he was a fugitive with a price on his head and might easily be recognized in Bloody Gap.

Moreover, he had allowed himself to forget for a moment that Les Edwards had been murdered tonight and the smart thing for him to do was to keep under cover for a few days to avoid being suspected of that killing also.

But it was too late to think about those things now. From the talk back at the cabin it appeared that the Boss hung out in Bloody Gap, and it was likely that he might veto the idea of taking Doctor Conroy to Hidden Valley when Jenkins put the proposition up to him. In that case, the Kid was determined to override the Boss' objections and bring the doctor to Hank if he had to kidnap him to accomplish his object. After all, he reminded himself, it was entirely possible that he might ride in and out of Bloody Gap without being recognized as Hugh Aiken. Few reputable citizens of Chapparell or ranchers from the other side of the mountains frequented the place. It had a bad reputation as a hangout for desperadoes and gunmen, and few of those who might have known Hugh Aiken in the past were likely to be alive three years later to recognize him. The high mortality rate among West-

ern gunmen was enough to practically assure that.

Jenkins remained morosely silent on the ride up from Hidden Valley to reach the main road running between Chapparell and Bloody Gap. The Kid noticed this change in his companion but made no mention of it until their horses were panting up the last steep incline leading directly into Bloody Gap. He could wait no longer.

Then he asked angrily, "What's eatin' on you anyhow? Ever since I blasted Half-Breed Joe back yonder you've been sulkin' like you'd lost yore best friend. An' if I read the signs right, Joe wasn't no friend of yours."

"He shore wasn't," Jenkins disclaimed hastily. "More'n once I've wondered how much longer I could stand bein' cooped up in that cabin with him. Had a mean streak a mile wide, Joe did. Full of liquor he was meaner'n a gila monster."

"Then what you grievin' 'bout?"

"Me? I'm not grievin' for Joe none. Only thing is . . ." Jenkins hesitated, his jaw tightening grimly.

"Spill it," the Kid urged harshly. "We're nigh to Bloody Gap. Yo're scairt of the feller you call the Boss, huh?"

"What if I am?" Jenkins blazed. "He's hell on wheels when he gets mad . . . and he shore ain't gonna like the news that a Bar L rider blasted Half-Breed Joe."

"S'pose you let me worry 'bout that," drawled the Kid.

"That's easy to say, but the Boss is liable to take it outta my hide fust," Jenkins mourned.

"Lemme tell him then. You keep yore trap shut an' I'll take all the blame. I ain't scared of him."

"You don't know the Boss," Jenkins reminded him dolefully.

The Rio Kid said, "I'm shore lookin' forward to it," with a note of deep sincerity in his voice that caused Jenkins to turn and look at him with a puzzled expression.

"It ain't lucky to talk out loud about the Boss here in Bloody Gap," he warned hastily. "Ain't but a few hereabouts guess what goes on in Hidden Valley or that the Boss has any hand in it."

They topped the last rise and the tiny mountain village lay spread out in front of them. Little more than a wide spot in the road, the town of Bloody Gap consisted of half a dozen frame buildings on either side of the road that formed the hamlet's main street.

ONLY one building was lighted at this hour of the night. It was the largest building in town, a two-story structure with a saloon and dance-hall below, sleeping rooms above for any travelers foolish enough to seek shelter, and for a place to drag off drunks after they had imbibed too freely at the bar below.

A dozen or more saddled horses stood patiently at the hitchrack outside the saloon, and Jenkins pulled up there, suggesting, "Likely find Doc Conroy here. If he ain't, they'll know where he's at."

The Rio Kid nodded agreement, his face an expressionless mask. Music and loud laughter came out of the swinging doors beyond the hitchrack. A tense feeling of excitement gripped the Kid as he tied Thunderbolt and prepared to enter behind Jenkins.

This was the moment he had waited for and feared for three years. It wasn't quite like facing a similar crowd in a Chapparell saloon, but there was the same danger here in a lesser degree. He felt keyed-up, ready for any sort of a showdown. He was through with skulking. He was going to walk in with his head up, and let his guns talk for him if need be.

His stride was deliberate and steady as he crossed the rotting board walk behind Jenkins. Instinctively, his hands went to gun-butts at his hips to loosen the weapons in their holsters and assure himself there wouldn't be any drag that would lose him a precious fraction of a second if it came down to shooting.

A blast of hot air and the stench of bad liquor smote them in the faces when they pushed through the swinging doors. Half a dozen armed men were at the bar, and five others were seated around a poker table against the opposite wall. Beyond the bar was a small polished dance floor on which two girls in flaring short skirts and painted faces cavorted with a couple of bearded men in the garb of miners from the copper district farther north in the mountains.

The men at the bar glanced at them incuriously as they entered, but none of them said anything. The bartender was a fat moon-faced man. He greeted Jenkins heartily, as though he knew him well, "What'll it be, gents?"

Standing beside Jenkins the Kid said, "Whisky," and casually flipped a silver dollar onto the wet mahogany.

When the bartender set a bottle and two glasses in front of them, the Kid poured the glass full to the brim and Jenkins leaned forward to ask in a low voice, "Doc Conroy around tonight?"

"You bet your sweet life the doc's around." The bartender laughed jovially and nodded his bald head toward the poker table. "Setting in on a little game an' losing his pants, I reckon." He laughed again and recorked the bottle after the Kid set it down.

The Rio Kid picked up his drink and started toward the poker table. Jenkins caught his sleeve and pulled him back. "Don't be in too big a hurry. Doc don't like to be disturbed . . ."

The Kid said, "To hell with that. . . . A man's dyin'," in a loud, angry voice. He stood a couple of feet back from the bar and let his gaze rove down the row of faces that turned to look at him when he said that. None of the men at the bar looked familiar. None of them appeared to recognize him.

The Kid jerked his arm away from Jenkins and strode toward the poker table. He recognized Doc Conroy among the poker players at once. There was no mistaking the Irishman's bulbous nose and the beet-red complexion streaked with a network of blue veins that gave him an unhealthy appearance.

Three of the other players were strangers to the Kid. The fifth he recognized as a man whom he had known vaguely in the past, by unsavory reputation more than by personal contact—Pete Trobridge, owner of the saloon in which he stood.

Things were whispered and rumored about Trobridge, but never said openly. He was a tall thin man, with a sallow complexion and close-set eyes. Drooping mustaches partially hid the slitted cruelty of his mouth. He had never been known to carry a gun on his person, yet he had a reputation for ruthlessness. It was said that if a stranger got drunk in his saloon he was never heard of again. Lots of other similar things were said about Pete Trobridge, but always behind his back.

He glanced up at the Kid with flinty eyes as he neared the poker table. His eyes narrowed as he took in the Kid's appearance; the two guns tied low for usage and not for decoration, the young stranger's easy slouch as he approached the table, which contrasted with the hard, unblinking stare the Kid gave back to him.

For an instant the Kid's nerves froze. He thought Trobridge had recognized him. He remembered that this was the man Charlie had said saw him that fateful night when he left Sheriff Edwards' dead body in the trail behind him and headed for the Border. Strange he couldn't remember seeing another man in the trail that night. But Trobridge must have been there. Charlie said he had positively identified the new neck scarf Hugh Aiken was wearing.

IF TROBRIDGE had said a word about that night, the Kid would have started shooting then and there. But the saloonkeeper filmed the curiosity in his eyes and asked:

"Looking for someone?"

"Doctor Conroy," the Kid told him, making a pretense that he didn't know the doctor.

"The player at my right who is now trying to decide whether to call a bet of three dollars or throw his hand in," Trobridge said.

The doctor looked up in surprise and grunted, "Someone looking for me?" He threw his cards into the discards as he spoke.

The Kid nodded. "I'd like a word with you private."

Conroy hesitated, began to shake his head.

"Up at the front end of the bar will do," the Rio Kid said hastily. "We can have a drink while we're talking."

A broad smile spread over the doctor's flushed face. "Indade and why not?" he assented in his deepest brogue. He pushed back his chair and stood up, wavering as he did so. He smiled happily and groped for the Kid's shoulder, got hold of it for support, and went with him to the bar.

The bartender already had a bottle of Irish whisky out when they got there. It was more than half full. The Kid shoved a five-dollar gold piece across to him and said, "We'll be keeping the bottle."

The doctor's bloodshot eyes shone with gratification. He waited until the Kid filled his glass, then lifted it in an unsteady hand and crooned, "Here's to you, my fine young bucko, and may I drink many more to the same." He nodded ceremoniously and downed the drink.

Across the room the Kid saw Pete Trobridge's eyes fastened upon them with more than idle curiosity. Then he saw Jenkins unobtrusively making his way to the far end of the bar, noted that the saloon-keeper got up from the poker table to join Jenkins. He had an idea Trobridge wanted to question Jenkins about him, but nothing Jenkins could say would do any harm.

He refilled the doctor's glass and gave him his full attention. "A man's been shot bad down the road. We want you to fix him up."

"Shot, eh? That's no uncommon plague in these parts." Conroy frowned and belched gently. "If he's shot bad medical science can do nothing. If he's not shot bad he doesn't need me." The doctor emptied his glass again and looked hopefully at the bottle.

The Kid shook his head and recorked it. "Shot through the lungs," he insisted. "Yo're the best bullet man in Arizona. You can pull him through."

Doctor Conroy shook his head sadly. Tears formed in his eyes and splashed down the front of his dirty brocaded waistcoat. "Was the best bullet man in Arizona." He held out a shaking hand for the Kid's inspection. "Do you think a probe in those fingers is better than an instrument of death? Let your friend die in peace, lad. Don't ask me to murder him."

"You lie," said the Kid harshly. "You'll sober up when the job's there before you ready to be done. I've heard of you, Doctor Conroy."

A smile of cunning suffused the doctor's bloated features. He appeared not to have taken offense at the Rio Kid's words. His eyes fixed themselves avidly upon the bottle.

"Perhaps a wee nip might steady my hand, lad."

The Kid shook his head and slid the bottle into his hip pocket. "Not a drop until you're ready to go to work. Then one drink to steady you . . . an' the rest of the bottle when the job's done."

"You drive a hard bargain, lad." The doctor shook his head sadly. "But the cause of humanity has ever been a cry I could not resist. Where is your friend who suffers from an excess of lead content in his system?"

"I'll take you there," the Kid promised. He looked up to see Jenkins coming toward him wiping sweat from his face. The rustler had a sickly but relieved smile on his face. Trobridge was just resuming his seat at the poker table.

"I'm having the doctor's buckboard brought around," Jenkins told the Kid. "It'll be in front in a few minutes. Another drink while we're waitin'?"

"A short one for me an' for the doctor," the Kid warned.

THE swinging doors burst open behind them as they bellied up to the bar. An excited man started to rush past them, then stopped short when he saw Conroy.

He grabbed the doctor's sleeve and panted, "Yo're wanted in Chapparell bad. Les Edwards has been shot . . . through thuh back."

He was a thin, hatchet-faced man wearing two guns. Jenkins turned to him with an exclamation of surprise while the other occupants of the saloon started to crowd forward to hear his news.

Jenkins exclaimed, "Hell, it's Mart, ain't it? Hey, Kid! Look. It's Mart from the Bar L."

The Rio Kid stood braced against the bar, eying Mart steadily. Everything depended on what happened during the next few seconds. If he let Mart denounce him as an impostor . . . and no Bar L rider . . . it would end every chance to get help to Hank. It would also mean the end of his attempt to solve the mystery of rustled Bar L cattle in Hidden Valley.

The Kid nodded and his voice rasped through the silence. "Yeh. I see it's Mart, awright. I tol' you to come a-shootin," he flung at the hatchet-faced gunman angrily. "Go for yore guns so I'll have a good excuse to kill you."

Mart's jaw sagged open ludicrously. This attack from a man whom he had never seen before was so startling and unexpected that for a moment he was so taken by surprise that he couldn't find any answer.

He started to stammer, "B-b-but . . ."

The Rio Kid cut him short before he could say any more and spoil the set-up he'd made for himself. He growled, "Shore I know yo're yellow. I figgered you'd tuck yore laigs an' run like any other hound cur. But that ain't goin' to . . ."

Mart fell into the trap with an instinctive gesture toward his guns.

The Kid fired twice before Mart's guns were clear of their holsters. The bullets smashed him sideways and to his knees. He exhaled one sobbing breath and then

pitched face downward to the floor. The Kid turned away contemptuously and thumped the bar with the muzzle of a smoking gun.

He snarled, "I allus set 'em up after I kill a man. Belly up, you buckaroos, an' drink to Mart's soul havin' a fast trip to hell."

CHAPTER XIII

THE OCCUPANTS of the saloon surged up to the bar and drank, partially because they were averse to turning down the chance at a free drink and partially because none of them cared to offend the strange gunman who had just demonstrated his ability on Mart.

Only Pete Trobridge, the Kid noted through veiled eyes, refused his invitation. The saloon-keeper stayed in his chair at the poker table watching the whole scene with sardonic eyes.

From the men around him at the bar the Rio Kid caught muttered comments while they downed the drinks he was paying for:

"Les Edwards....shot through thuh back ....like his Pappy before him....sheriffin' is shore a dangerous pastime down Chapparell way....wonder is he daid.... Mart didn't have no chance tuh say.... reckon not or he wouldn't of come for Doc Conroy....new feller's faster'n greased lightnin' with his guns...."

Standing shoulder to shoulder with the Kid at the bar, Jenkins was acutely nervous. As he lifted his glass he muttered, "Whyn't you tell me you an' Mart was on the outs? I mighta stepped in an' stopped trouble if I'd knowed...."

"Why should I tell you?" the Kid asked cheerfully. "It was a private quarrel. No need for nobody to interfere. Mart's been honin' for this showdown....now he's got it."

"All this killin' ain't so good," Jenkins mourned. "Stirs things up....gets questions asked. With the sheriff gettin' shot tonight on top of that...." He shook his head dismally to indicate his fear that Edwards' death might somehow be thought to be tied up with these other killings.

The Kid laughed cheerfully and slapped Jenkins on the back. "It'll all come out in the wash. Let's get Conroy outta here so he won't get too full to dig that bullet outta Hank."

He nodded to the bartender for an accounting, pushing in front of the doctor as though by accident and forcing him back where he couldn't reach the bottle again.

He wasn't aware that Trobridge had risen and come forward until he heard him speaking to Conroy behind his back, "Hadn't you better be heading to Chapparell to tend to Les Edwards, Doc?"

The Kid whirled about angrily. "Conroy's got another job to do fust," he stated flatly.

Trobridge stroked his mustaches gently and studied the young man with a faint smile. "Taking a lot on yourself for a stranger, ain't you?"

"Not more'n I can carry," the Kid assured him. "I got fust call on the doctor."

"I don't think you understand the seriousness of this other call. The wounded man happens to be the sheriff of this county."

It was on the tip of the Kid's tongue to retort that Les Edwards was beyond the need of medical attention, but he caught the slip in time. Wouldn't do to admit that he had prior knowledge of the shooting. He changed his words to an emphatic statement:

"One man's life is jest as important as another's."

"I can't agree with you." Trobridge was still smiling faintly. Every man in the saloon was watching and listening to the exchange between them. It seemed to the Kid that Trobridge was deliberately goading him on to make some sort of damaging admission, and he was acutely aware of the danger of his position.

"Our former sheriff died just three years ago with a bullet through his back," Trobridge went on in that same mocking tone. "It'll look bad if his son dies the same way."

"That ain't my fault," the Kid said harshly, wincing inwardly at the thought that his assertion would be branded a lie if those who heard him knew who he was. "I'm takin' Doc Conroy with me."

"I don't think so." Trobridge turned away from him to two of the men standing near by. "Put the doctor in his buckboard and see that he gets to Chapparell at once."

THE KID'S bluff had been called by Trobridge, backed up by a dozen gunmen. He had managed to stay alive this long by knowing when not to butt his head against a stone wall. He shrugged his

shoulders to admit defeat and said, "Awright. I reckon you win. Jest to show there's no hard feelin's, have a drink with me."

"I'll do that," Trobridge agreed, "but you can't spend any more money here in my place." His manner became instantly agreeable when the Kid backed down. He nodded to the bartender and said, "Fill them up out of my private stock."

The two men hustled Doctor Conroy out of the saloon to his buckboard. A swamper came from the rear to drag away Mart's body, scattering sawdust over the blood on the floor. The others moved away from the Kid and Trobridge, Jenkins going with them reluctantly, looking back at the Kid with a questioning scowl.

"You'll do all right when you learn the ropes around here," Trobridge told him. "New, ain't you?"

"Yeh." The Kid leaned forward resting both his elbows on the bar, nursing his glass of mellow rich whisky from the owner's private bottle between the palms of both hands.

"How'd you happen to drift to the Bar L?"

"Well, I....I knowed Henry Pelham before....in Mexico." The Kid frowned down at his glass, pretending not to notice the small start of surprise from Trobridge that greeted his casual statement.

"Mexico, eh? An' he sent for you to come an' ride for him?" Trobridge probed.

"Not exactly. I heard he'd set up ranchin' here an' thought he maybe could use a hand like me." The Kid turned suddenly with an assumption of anger. "What're all these questions for? I don't owe you no information."

Trobridge held up a placating hand. "No need to get wringy over some questions. You got nuthin' to hide from me, I reckon."

The Rio Kid frowned darkly. "I dunno," he confessed truthfully. "I dunno where you figger in the set-up."

Trobridge laughed and emptied his glass. "Don't worry your head over it too much. Man that slings lead with both hands like you don't need too much brains."

He sauntered off across the room and the Kid followed him with bleak eyes. He didn't like that kind of a crack, but for the moment he was too busy trying to absorb the information he had gathered from Trobridge to start any further trouble.

There wasn't anything definite—and that was the most peculiar part of it. All he could get hold of tonight was a series of vagrant hints and half-spoken ideas. Every time he thought he'd found two of them that fitted together he immediately discovered another piece that threw the others out of balance.

He vented himself of a disgusted grunt and emptied his glass of good whisky. It warmed his belly, arousing him to the need for immediate action. He stepped away from the bar, caught Jenkins' eyes from the back of the room. He jerked his head in a signal for the other to join him, then sauntered out between the swinging doors.

He was in the saddle, impatiently waiting, when Jenkins emerged a few minutes later. He said, "Let's be ridin'," before Jenkins could ask any questions, reined Thunderbolt away from the rail. He held the black stallion down to an easy lope until Jenkins galloped up alongside him, then let the eager black out into his stride.

Jenkins had to spur his mount to keep up the pace. "What's your hurry?" he panted. "We can't do no good back in Hidden Valley without a doctor."

"That's why," the Kid shouted above the thunder of hooves, "I'm hurryin'. I figger we can just aboot catch Doc Conroy's buckboard on the road before we come to the turnoff to Hidden Valley."

"You mean you're goin' to try to stop the doc from goin' on to Chapparell?"

"Not try. I'm goin' to stop him. We need him more'n that kid sheriff does."

"Those two fellers that rode with him are bad," Jenkins warned. "They'll be hell-bent on takin' Doc to Chapparell."

"They'll be hell-bent, awright, if they try to stop me from grabbin' him," the Kid growled. He leaned low in the saddle and urged Thunderbolt to increased speed, wasting no more breath on argument with the timid Jenkins.

HIS companion slowly dropped to the rear as Thunderbolt really got into his stride, and Jenkins was a full quarter of a mile behind when the Kid approached the point where the road forked to dip over into Hidden Valley.

He had cut his figurin' mighty thin, tooling around back in the saloon and letting the buckboard get a long head start, but Thunderbolt's speed had made up the difference and he glimpsed the rig ahead of

him in the moonlight as it neared the turning-off point.

He whooped loudly as he reined up beside the fast-moving vehicle, leaned from the shadow to shout, "Yo're turnin' off here, fellers. To the left up ahaid this side of the ridge."

"The hell yuh say. This is thuh road to Chapparell an' we're stayin' on it," was the surly response of the driver, cracking his blacksnake over the backs of the team.

The Kid hesitated. Doctor Conroy was in the seat between the two men sent by Trobridge to see that he reached Chapparell. If he shot it out with the two men, managed to kill them both, the team would surely bolt and smash the vehicle on the rocks beside the road—and the doctor with it.

There was only one chance the Kid could see, and he took it without hesitation.

He whipped out his left-hand gun and covered the two men, spurred Thunderbolt up in front of the team and herded them off the main road onto the rough way leading down into Hidden Valley.

The men cursed loudly behind him on the buckboard, and he caught the glint of steel in the moonlight as one of them attempted to sneak a gun from its holster without being seen.

The Kid fired back without warning and the man gave a yelp of pain, and his gun clattered to the ground.

With the team headed into the Hidden Valley road, the Kid dropped back to a position beside the driver and ordered, "Whip 'em into a run. We ain't got no time to waste, an' I ain't foolin'."

CHAPTER XIV

IT DIDN'T require any further admonition from the Kid to convince the driver that he was in earnest. Twice tonight he had witnessed the Kid's deadly accuracy with his guns, and now, under that menace, he braced himself and gave all his strength and driving skill to the task of keeping the rocking vehicle upright in its mad dash down the twisting road into Hidden Valley.

On the other side of Doctor Conroy, the driver's companion was whimpering with pain and nursing his broken right wrist from the terrific jolting it was receiving; while Jenkins spurred his horse from behind, vainly trying to catch up with the flying buckboard.

The Kid wondered uneasily how the doctor was taking this abrupt change in his destination, whether the half-drunk Irishman would be frightened or angry at the rude intervention, but he didn't remain long in doubt on that score.

As they snaked down into the valley with double-trees rattling against the haunches of the flying team the doctor's rich baritone floated out into the night above the drum of hooves and the alarming creaks of the careening vehicle.

The Kid couldn't distinguish the words of the doctor's song, but it was a stirring, martial Irish air, and it didn't seem to indictate that Conroy was either frightened or angry. Indeed, it gave the opposite impression—that the doctor was delighted with the turn events had taken, and the Rio Kid grinned to himself as he wondered if that was because the doctor remembered the bottle of Irish whisky in his hip pocket which had been promised as a reward after his job in Hidden Valley was finished.

The grin faded from the Kid's face as they neared the lighted cabin below. He leaned from the saddle to shout, "Pull 'em up now. We're stoppin' here."

The driver obediently sawed on the lines but the headlong gallop of the team did not slacken. With the bits in their mouths they were running free on the level, galloping straight ahead on a course that would take them past the cabin and beyond into the broken country where an overturn would be almost a certainty.

The Kid sent Thunderbolt lunging ahead in front of the runaway team, swerved the stallion to the left to break the rhythm of their stride and start them circling back to the cabin. Their speed slowly slackened as they were forced to circle, and the driver gradually regained control.

He had them slowed to a panting trot when they approached the cabin again, and they were glad to stop in front of the door.

Jenkins had ridden directly to the cabin while the Kid was circling the team back, and he met him with a worried look on his face. "You shouldn't of done it, Kid. The Boss'll be mad as hops when he finds out about this."

"The Boss can chew on a railroad spike," said the Kid harshly. He rode up to the halted vehicle and ordered curtly, "All out. Yore patient's inside, Doc."

"What about my arm?" whimpered the wounded man, holding the broken limb

straight out in front of him. "Cain't thuh doc take a look at it first?"

"A broken arm'll wait. You keep on eye on these yahoos, Jenkins. C'mon, Doc."

The Kid slid off Thunderbolt and approached the side of the buckboard. The doctor laughed jovially and stepped down over the wheel. "And that I will, my fine bucko. Though I'll require a bit of a nip, no doubt, to steady my hand for the work before me."

"You'll get it," the Kid promised. He waited impatiently while Doctor Conroy lifted his shabby black bag from the rear of the buckboard, then seized his arm firmly and guided him to the cabin.

Sam looked up listly from a game of solitaire when they entered the cabin. The Kid noted that the whisky level in the jug had gone down a full inch since he had last seen it, and he judged that the bearded man remained seated because he knew he would be unable to stand up if he left the safety of his chair.

Half-Breed Joe still lay in a twisted heap on the floor where the Kid's bullets had left him. The doctor hurried forward with professional interest and knelt beside the dead gunman, then looked up at the Kid with an angry shake of his head.

"What devil's game is this you're playing on me, laddie? 'Twill do this man no good to relieve the overdose of lead he's swallowed. He's been in hell this long since, as well you should know."

"It's not him I'm worried about." The Kid nodded toward Hank Greenow in the corner. "There's your patient."

THE DOCTOR strode on to Hank, stopped dead still when he saw the old man's lined face. He leaned down swiftly and felt for the heartbeat, then ordered over his shoulder, "Hot water, and lots of it."

He was ripping the blood-soaked clothing away from Hank's chest with one hand while he fumbled with the catch on his bag with the other.

The Kid looked around the room helplessly. There was a soot-blackened wood range in one corner, but the fire was out of it, and there wasn't even any wood to kindle another.

He anxiously told the doctor, "There's no fire to heat water. Can you wait while I build one?"

"Hell's kettledrums and prostrated goldfish!" roared the doctor. "This man can't wait another five minutes. Bring that jug of whisky from the table. From the aroma as we entered I judge it's rank enough to kill any germs that may be in the vicinity."

He had Hank's chest bared and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows when the Kid brought the half gallon of whisky. He held out his hands and directed the Kid to pour the high-proof liquor over them while he rubbed them together vigorously, then he tore a strip of cloth from Hank's shirt and soaked it with the whisky, cleaned the wound with the makeshift disinfectant while he snapped, "Get that lamp down here close so I can see what I'm doing. It's going to be nip and tuck....and we'll pray to God nip wins."

He was calm and collected now, sure of himself and of his steady hands. Every outward trace of drunkenness had disappeared, though the strong fumes rising from the spilled liquor caused the Kid's head to reel and he marveled that the doctor could work under those conditions at all.

He held the lamp low to give Conroy the best possible light and watched with fascination while the surgeon selected a gleaming instrument from his bag, washed it in whisky and then went at the delicate task of probing in Hank Greenow's chest for the lead slug from the Kid's gun.

The old man mercifully remained in the depths of his coma while the probing went on, with only his faint breathing to indicate that he still lived.

After what seemed to the Kid hours of breathless waiting, Doctor Conroy rocked back on his heels with a grunt of satisfaction. He held a pair of blood-smeared tweezers in his hand, and between the tips of the tweezers was a misshapen lead bullet.

He laid the tweezers and bullet aside carefully, picked up the jug and poured whiskey into the gaping wound in Hank's chest. He started to lift the jug to his lips, and the Kid noticed that his hand was shaking violently again, now that the emergency was over.

He hesitated, though, and set the jug aside, remembering happily, "You've got something better than that rot-gut in your hip pocket. Have I earned my drink?"

"Will he live?" the Kid asked anxiously, pulling the bottle of Irish whisky from his pocket and handing it to the squatting surgeon.

"Him?" Conroy snorted derisively. "He'll

be-riding the range looking for more rustlers in a couple of weeks. Tough as whitleather, he is."

He uncorked the bottle and tilted it to his mouth, held it there and gurgled until it was empty. He looked at the Rio Kid with bright suspicious eyes when he put it down. "Which brings me around to asking....why did you shoot him and then go to such trouble to have me come and save his life?"

"How do you know I shot him?" growled the Kid, taken aback by the abruptness of the question.

For answer the doctor rocked forward on his knees and picked up the bullet he had taken from Hank's body. He rolled it around between thumb and forefinger while he studied its shape and size, then dropped it into the palm of his left hand and hefted it, with his eyes closed and a frown of concentration on his face.

HE SAID, "It's a forty-five, but then there's lots of forty-fives in these parts." He laid the slug down carefully as though it was a precious jewel and reached forward to lift a loaded cartridge from the Kid's belt without giving any explanation of his action.

He nodded tranquilly after examining the brass cylinder and the snub-nosed bullet protruding from the end of it. "I could go into court and prove you shot him," he told the Kid with positive certainty. "Hereabouts the taste runs to Colt's ammunition. You bought your shells some place else. That piece of lead matches this cartridge in your gunbelt."

"Hell, a forty-five is a forty-five, ain't it?"

The Doctor shook his head placidly. "Not always. Different manufacturers use a different amount of lead molded in different shapes. I've made a hobby of studying bullets for years," he went on. He delved into the depths of his shabby black bag and brought out a little tin box which he handled with loving care. He opened it and proudly displayed forty or fifty misshapen lead slugs that to the Kid's untutored eyes looked exactly like the one he had taken out of Hank. Each bullet was glued to a small piece of paper bearing a name and a date.

"Each one a death bullet," Doctor Conroy told him. "For twenty years I've been saving and studying and classifying bullets. Here's a complete record of the gun-deaths I've attended during the last twenty years. If old Hank had croaked," he added cheerfully, "I could have added this slug to my collection....but I got here too soon."

The Rio Kid leaned over and studied the collection of death pellets with narrowed eyes. "An' you can tell what gun any bullet was fired from?" he asked incredulously.

"Not at all. By weight and measurements it's easy to determine the caliber and the make of ammunition." The doctor's eyes gleamed with interest as he expatiated on his hobby to a willing listener. He seemed to see nothing incongruous in the fact that the discussion was taking place in a rustler's cabin with a dead man on the floor behind them and a man who had just been snatched from death outstretched in front of them.

"There's a new science called the study of ballistics coming to the fore," Conroy went on. "I've read all the literature I could find on the subject, and made some experiments of my own. Every gun treats a bullet differently as it expels it through the barrel. The grooves or rifling in a barrel leaves distinctive marks on each bullet that enables an expert to identify the gun from which it was fired by comparing two bullets under a microscope. I've used my medical microscope for such examinations, and I've learned some curious things from these old bullets here."

The Kid's breath was coming faster. His forefinger trembled as he poked among the doctor's sinister souvenirs. "You been savin' 'em for twenty years, huh? Got 'em all tagged an' dated?"

"That's right. Every last one. And that reminds me, I might as well add to my collection by digging one out of this corpse conveniently waiting for me here on the floor."

The doctor picked up a scalpel and approached the breed's stiffening body with professional interest.

The Kid paid no attention to him. He found what he sought at last, turned to the doctor with a slug whose attached slip of paper bore a date three years previous, and the inscription: "Sheriff Edwards."

"Jest happened to notice this one," he apologized for interrupting the doctor at his ghoulish task. "Sheriff Edwards? I thought that was the name Mart said tonight in

Bloody Gap of the sheriff that'd jest been shot."

"That's right. The present sheriff's father. And that reminds me, by the Saints." The doctor jumped to his feet holding a bullet he'd been digging from Joe's body. "I must be getting along to Chapparell. If Les Edwards has kicked the bucket in this interim—and it'd be small loss to the community—I certainly must add his bullet to my collection. Interesting, eh? Father and son."

He was busily closing up his bag and getting ready to depart.

The Kid went to the door and found Jenkins sitting on the threshold outside. He said, "The doctor's ready to leave. Where are the fellers that were drivin' his rig?"

Jenkins shook his head and spat disgustedly. "They run off in the dark when I turned my back. Look here, Kid. I don't like none of this. By God. . . ."

"No one," said the Kid coldly, "is askin' you what you like or don't like."

He stepped out of the door as the doctor bustled forward. "You'll have to drive the team yourself, Doc. I'll ride ahaid an' guide you up to the main road."

He went on to Thunderbolt and stepped into the saddle without wasting further words on Jenkins. A showdown was building up, but it could wait until he'd seen Conroy on his way.

He loped up the long slope ahead of the buckboard, reached the road from Chapparell just in time to intercept two riders on their way to Bloody Gap. They were going to pass him without speaking, but when they recognized the buckboard behind him they hailed Doctor Conroy:

"If you're headin' for Chapparell to work on Les Edwards, you ain't needed, Doc. He's as dead as hell."

The Kid stayed unobtrusively back in the shadows unnoticed and listened.

"Dead, eh?" Conroy asked cheerfully. "That still leaves me a job. . . . I'm official coroner, you know."

"No inquest needed," one of the riders growled. "They already got the feller that killed him. . . . locked up in jail."

"That so? Who did the good deed?"

"Charlie Barnes, dang it. Cain't understand how-come Charlie done a thing like that. He don't hardly never tote a gun. But I reckon they got him dead to rights. That was the talk around Chapparell when we left town."

CHAPTER XV

"CHARLIE BARNES?" Doctor Conroy echoed disbelievingly. "Don't seem possible. He never liked Les much, but he's not the shooting kind."

"Reckon it was a mix-up over a gal," one of the riders said wisely. "Mexican gal at the Bar L."

"That doesn't sound like Charlie either," protested Conroy. "He's been going steady with Peggy Aiken for years . . . never fooled around with other girls."

"Way the talk is aroun' town . . . Peggy gave him the mitt tonight. Decided tuh marry Henry Pelham all of a sudden. An' Charlie took a hay-cuttin' job for Pelham, just for a chanct tuh be close aroun' the Mex gal, I reckon . . . but Les Edwards figgered he already had her staked out an' didn't take kindly tuh Charlie hornin' in. They fought over the gal, I reckon, an' Charlie pulls down with a borrowed gun an' kills him."

"Too bad," murmured the doctor sadly. "It's tragic sometimes . . . the things a jilted lover will do. Well," he went on more briskly, "I'll drive in myself and see what's what."

He spoke to the team and they moved forward on the road to Chapparell.

The Rio Kid waited back in the shadows where he had been forgotten until the two riders had passed on beyond him toward Bloody Gap. Then he put Thunderbolt to a gallop and quickly overtook the doctor, leaning from his saddle and shouting, "Pull up a minute, Doc. I've got to talk to you."

"Oh, it's you again?" Conroy frowned at him but pulled the team up. "What more have you to say to me?"

"Just this, Doc. I heard what them fellers said back there. They lie. Charlie Barnes didn't kill Les Edwards."

"What's that? How do you know?"

"I *know*," the Rio Kid told him in a tone of passionate conviction. "I cain't tell you how or what I know jest yet," he went on rapidly, "but I'm askin' you to take my word for it an' do this. When you dig that bullet out of Edwards for yore collection, check up on it the best you can an' see was it shot out of Charlie's gun. Then you'll know I'm tellin' you the truth."

"Were you at the Bar L when Edwards was killed?"

"Yeh. I was there," the Kid told him

unemotionally. "But I didn't do it neither. You can prove *that* by comparin' the bullet with the one you took outta Hank . . . if all that stuff you tol' me back at the cabin is true."

"It's true enough," Conroy told him sharply. He hesitated, suspiciously studying the Kid's aquiline features in the soft moonlight. "You're right in the middle of a lot of queer things for a stranger to these parts," he commented. "I keep having the feeling that I've seen you before . . . though I can't remember where or when."

"I aim to start clearin' up some of them queer things right now," the Kid promised recklessly. "All I'm askin' is for you to go slow on Charlie Barnes. That ain't much."

The doctor said curtly, "Barnes will get fair treatment . . . the same as he would have gotten if you hadn't put in your oar." He seemed on the verge of saying more, then clamped his lips together tightly and gave his team loose rein.

The Rio Kid sat astride Thunderbolt, a statuesque figure in the moonlight, and watched the buckboard disappear swiftly from sight. By God, it was amazing the way the Irishman could sop up whisky. He'd drunk more than a pint back there at the cabin after saving Hank Greenow's life, on top of all he'd had previously in Bloody Gap, and his voice wasn't even fuzzy at the corners. For a moment the Kid regretted that he hadn't confided fully in Conroy before letting him drive away. He felt the doctor was a man he could trust—even with the secret of his identity—but that could come later just as well as now.

Right now there were a lot of things to be done. He hadn't had time to consider the full impact of the staggering news he'd heard about Peggy. His sister had jilted Charlie Barnes for Henry Pelham! Why! What had happened?

No wonder Charlie had acted funny when he talked about Peggy tonight.

The Kid swore a long-jointed violent oath at all girls in general and sisters in particular. Peggy *must* have changed a lot in the last three years. He wheeled Thunderbolt about and sent him plunging back to the turn-off leading to Hidden Valley. It was time Jenkins answered a few questions.

Jenkins came to the door of the cabin and stared out at him when the Rio Kid rode up to the door. He flung himself out of the saddle and strode forward. Jenkins stepped back to let him enter. He gestured toward Hank lying in the corner and said, "Guess the doc fixed him up all right. He's breathin' easy now, an' ain't coughin' up no more blood."

SAM sat hunched in his chair at the table with head and shoulders slumped forward laxly. His eyes were closed and he breathed stertorously.

The Kid said, "That's good aboot Hank." He faced Jenkins in the center of the small room with both thumbs hooked in his gunbelts.

In a flat tone, he said, "So Pete Trobridge is the feller you call Boss, huh?"

"What reason you got for guessin' that?"

"When we rode to Bloody Gap you were mighty sot on gettin' permission from the Boss 'fore we brought Doc Conroy back with us," the Kid reminded him. "Then you talked to Trobridge, an' right afterward you said it was awright, that they was bringin' the doc's buckboard around. That purty nigh cinches Trobridge for the Boss."

"All right. What of it? You'd be findin' out soon enough anyhow . . . workin' on the Bar L and all."

"Yeh," the Kid agreed placidly, "I reckon I woulda found out anyhow." He seated himself at the table opposite the unconscious Sam and thoughtfully rolled a cigarette. "Trobridge has been runnin' stuff through Hidden Valley for three years, huh?"

"This is the third season." After a moment's hesitation Jenkins pulled up a chair and sat down also. He boasted, "Come daylight you'll look over the slickest herd ever gathered here. More'n four hunderd head this year."

The Kid was still at a total loss to understand what stock was being rustled by whom from where. Four hundred head of yearlings wearing unmarred Bar L brands. It didn't make sense any way he looked at it. Yet he couldn't reveal his ignorance by coming right out and questioning Jenkins. To do so would immediately prove that he wasn't a Bar L rider and would cut off any possibility of receiving further information.

Feeling that an impasse had been reached, he changed the conversation by mentioning casually, "Met a couple of riders from

Chapparell when I took Conroy to the road."

"That so? Did they say how bad Edwards was hurt?"

"Yeh. He's daid."

"I swanny," Jenkins ejaculated. "They got any idee who done it?"

"They said 'twas a feller named Charlie Barnes."

"That so? I know Barnes . . . met him in Chapparell once or twict. That's a funny thing," Jenkins mused. "Charlie's been sparkin' a gal named Peggy Aiken . . . runs the Triangle A where old Hank works."

"What's funny?" the Kid demanded.

"I was jest thinkin' . . . Peggy's brother killed Les Edwards' father three years ago. Skipped the country an' ain't been heard of since. Now the Aiken gal's sweetheart up an' kills Les Edwards. Kinda funny any way you look at it."

"Yeh," said the Kid somberly. "Damn funny." He sucked on his cigarette and stared across the pine table at Jenkins with slitted eyes. "What'd you say if I told you I was that gal's brother?"

"You? Hugh Aiken? The . . . Rio Kid?" Jenkins laughed uncertainly. "Yo're jest funnin', I reckon." But he wet dry lips with his tongue and stared half in disbelief and half in fear at the hard-faced young gunman who didn't laugh as he suggested he might be the notorious Rio Kid.

The Kid said, "Mebby I'm funnin' . . . mebby not, Jenkins."

"But good Lord, Hugh Aiken couldn't come back here. He'd be strung up the minute he showed his face. There's still a reward out for him."

"Would you like to collect that reward?" the Kid queried softly.

"Me?" Jenkins paled. A hunted look came into his eyes. He tried to wet his lips again but there was no moisture on his tongue. "I ain't . . . I shore ain't worryin' about no reward money. No siree. Not me, I ain't."

"That's good," said the Rio Kid flatly. "If I was Hugh Aiken I'd shore wanta hear you say jest that." His hard gray eyes stalked the unhappy Jenkins again. "An' I wouldn't want the news to get aroun' neither. Not to Trobridge, f'r instance. Pete Trobridge," he went on calmly, "is the feller that claimed he seen Hugh Aiken runnin' away that night Sheriff Edwards was shot in the back. I figger to prove him a liar on that, an' I wouldn't want him hornin' in an' causin' trouble while I'm goin' aboot provin' it."

He stood up and stretched, opened his mouth in a wide yawn. "Reckon I'll be moseyin' along. Got a heap of things to 'tend to. Two Edwardses are daid, an' the wrong man accused in both killin's."

He sauntered toward the door and Jenkins stopped him with a worried question:

"Ain't you gonna . . . wait till daylight to look over the stuff here?"

"Not tonight," the Kid replied easily. "I'm headin' back to the Bar L, an' then on into Chapparell to start provin' Pete Trobridge a liar aboot seein' Hugh Aiken one night three years ago. Reckon mebby I'll bust things hereabouts wide open 'fore I'm done. No need to worry now about this stuff that's gathered here."

He paused in the doorway, glancing back at Hank Greenow. For a moment he had forgotten the old man, not realizing the danger in which he was placing him by making his casual revelations to Jenkins which he hoped would bear fruit before morning.

Now he realized he couldn't leave the wounded man here in the rustler hangout. Might kill Hank to move him, but Doc Conroy had said the old fellow was tough as whit-leather.

He made a quick decision, turning back into the room. "Reckon I'll take Hank 'long with me," he announced placidly, as though it was an unimportant matter. "I want to ask him some questions soon's he wakes up an' starts talkin'."

He turned his back on Jenkins and stooped over the old man, listened to the slow steady beat of Hank's heart and was reassured.

He wrapped a dirty blanket around him and hoisted the limp figure up on his shoulder, strode out of the cabin, totally disregarding Jenkins who watched his movements with a sickly scowl.

Outside, the Kid strapped Hank securely on the back of the Triangle A horse again, then mounted Thunderbolt. Through the open door of the cabin he could see Jenkins still sitting at the table as though in a stupor.

Leading the Triangle A horse behind him, he rode away on the old familiar road, on the most dangerous mission he had ever attempted.

CHAPTER XVI

THE Rio Kid stopped his horse on top of the pass leading out of Hidden Valley and glanced back at the cabin below him. Light no longer showed from the windows of the cabin. He shrewdly suspected that Jenkins had not turned it out and gone to bed, but was even now galloping to Bloody Gap to carry to Pete Trobridge his astounding information about the Rio Kid's return. He grimly hoped Jenkins had taken the bait he dangled in front of him. A lot of things had to happen in a hurry during the next few hours. He figured he had just a few hours left before everything would be over—one way or another.

He had no definite plan of action outlined. He would have to depend a lot on luck and a lot on the element of surprise. He *knew* only two things—that he and Charlie Barnes were innocent of killing Sheriff Edwards and Les. Everything else was chaotic and jumbled.

He loosed Thunderbolt's reins and rode down off the pass with the burdened lead horse trotting docilely behind him. He kept a keen watch for a trail leading off to the right, a little-known trail that swung north of the Bar L range directly into Triangle A territory.

When he reached that turning-off point he found the old trail had completely vanished, obliterated by the weather and lack of use, but he turned to the right confidently, recognizing old landmarks as he drew closer to the Triangle A, feeling his heart beat faster as his course led him into the old familiar trails of his boyhood.

He pulled the black stallion up sharply when the triangle of huge cottonwoods first showed before him in the fading moonlight. He sat very still in the saddle and set his teeth together hard. A tremor tightened his muscles convulsively and he wasn't ashamed of a sharp stinging sensation behind his eyelids.

Home! There it was. Those three sentinel cottonwoods he had seen in his dreams for three years. He hadn't let himself realize how damned much it meant to him. The possibility of his return had always seemed so hopeless. Now, he was here.

He knew it was a trick of his imagination, that his hot eyes couldn't actually perceive the outline of the ranch building nestled beneath the trees; but he saw it plainly as he sat there groping back through the mirage of lost years.

Peggy lay asleep there, behind those darkened windows. The bunkhouse was deserted tonight, with old Hank Greenow's bunk waiting there to receive his wounded body.

Until this moment the Kid had vaguely planned to try to make Hank comfortable in his own bed and ride away without arousing Peggy. During the ride down from the pass he had told himself sternly that he didn't want to see Peggy, that she was somehow unworthy. He had a distinct feeling that she had sent Charlie into trouble tonight when she sent him away from her and agreed to marry Henry Pelham.

Now, he knew he wanted to see Peggy more than any other person on earth. He knew he had no right to sit back like God and pass judgment on the girl. If she had changed so much during these past three years, wasn't it as much his fault as hers?

He touched a spur to Thunderbolt and sent the black stallion forward. Now the trees assumed form and substance in the moonlight. In the shadow beneath their guarding branches the house that his father had built emerged suddenly as he remembered it.

He rode directly to the front door and leaped off lightly, strode up on the porch and pounded on the door with his hard knuckles.

He heard immediate movement within, as though Peggy's sleep had been troubled and she had been ready for this summons. A patch of light appeared at the rear, and a moment later Peggy's voice came out to him through the door, clear and unafraid:

"Who is it?"

"It's Hugh."

HE WAITED tensely, saying no more, wondering if she would believe him, whether she could accept the impossible.

The knob rattled and the door came open. He saw the pale blur of Peggy's white face—then she was in his arms, sobbing a little, but quietly, saying nothing at all, clinging to him with a fierce strength that told him everything he wanted to know.

"Yeh. It's me, Peg." He was inside, standing in front of her in the full glare of a lighted lamp.

"You shouldn't have come, Hugh." Her face was as pale as the white muslin night-

gown that trailed the floor at her feet. Strained fingers gripped the table for support. "You can't stay!" she cried desperately. "They'll find you, and . . ."

"I am stayin'," he told her deliberately. He drew in a deep breath, then motioned out the door. "I've got old Hank outside. He's shot bad . . . but Doc Conroy says he'll pull through."

"Hank? And Doc Conroy? Oh, Hugh! what do you mean? I don't understand . . ."

"An' there's no time tonight for explanations," he told her swiftly. "I can't stay but a minute. I'll put Hank in his bunk. . . ."

"No. Bring him in here, Hugh. Where I can nurse him." Peggy put a trembling hand to her forehead. "I'm all mixed up. I thought Hank was in his bed asleep."

"He's asleep," the Kid told her grimly. He strode out the door and removed Hank from the saddle. Peggy had snatched up a worn old bathrobe and had it about her shoulders when he returned bearing the foreman's limp body.

"I'm here, Hugh. In Mother's and Dad's room." She was calm now, leading the way into the unused bedroom next to hers, turning back the covers with a steady hand.

The Kid laid Hank down gently. "He'll be all right," he assured her. His eyes devoured his sister for a long moment. She was looking at the low-tied guns on his hips, the lines of hard recklessness on his young face that hadn't been there when she saw him last.

"I'm ridin' to Chapparell," he told her briefly. "I'm not runnin' away this time, Peg. I'm gonna find some way of provin' I didn't kill Sheriff Edwards."

"I knew you didn't, Hugh. As soon as I heard he was shot through the back, I knew it."

"Another sheriff got shot through the back tonight," he told her roughly. "Les Edwards."

She closed her eyes a moment. Then opened them wide. "Les? How, Hugh? Oh, you didn't . . . ?"

He shook his head grimly. "They've got Charlie Barnes locked up in jail for killin' Les."

She swayed back, seemed to shrink inside the faded bathrobe under the impact of that news.

The Kid watched her keenly, and was suddenly glad. She loved Charlie, all right. No matter what she had said or done, she still loved Charlie.

"It happened on the Bar L," he went on swiftly. "They say Charlie an' Les got in a fight over a Mexican gal . . . after you give Charlie the cold shoulder tonight."

She opened her eyes wide and every freckle stood out distinctly against the whiteness of her face. "Charlie . . . fought over a Mexican girl with Les?" she faltered.

"That's what they're sayin'." The Rio Kid stepped close to her and cupped a hard palm beneath her chin. "How aboot it, Sis? Did you hand Charlie his walkin' papers?"

Her dilated eyes met his gaze squarely and without faltering. "I sort of did, Hugh. That is, he acted funny. He gave in to Henry Pelham like a weakling. He sided with Henry about cutting hay for winter feed . . . jumped at the chance of a job on the Bar L, a *farmer's* job."

The Kid winced at the bitterness in Peggy's voice. He was beginning to understand a lot of things that had been foggy a short time before.

"You shouldn't have blamed Charlie for that," he told her roughly. "He was doin' it for me, I reckon. He knowed I was ridin' in to the Bar L not knowin' it was bein' ranched now. I'd writ Charlie from El Paso to meet me there. I'd say he took that job jest to be over there on the off-chance of catchin' an' warnin' me 'fore I rode on into the middle of a mess of trouble. He was scared to tell you . . . scared to tell anybody till he seen how the land lay."

Peggy's clear eyes became clouded. That was it then. That explained Charlie's queer behavior this afternoon. Oh God! if she'd only known. He might have told her, she thought fiercely, then realized that he couldn't. Not with Henry Pelham there. And she remembered that Charlie had seen her practically in Henry's arms as he rode up.

HOT shame flooded her thin cheeks with color. She lowered her eyelids against the Kid's questioning gaze and said faintly, "I didn't know . . . he didn't tell me anything."

"How about this Henry Pelham? What sorta jasper is he? Are you serious aboot marryin' him, Sis?"

"I don't know. I told him I would this

afternoon. I was so mixed up, Hugh. Things are terrible here on the ranch. Everything has been going wrong. Henry is strong and sure of himself. He's rich and getting richer all the time. Everything he touches turns into money."

"So my sister is sellin' herse'f to a rich man?" The Kid bit off the words acidly.

Trembling violently, Peggy faced his scornful gaze. "It was partly that, I guess. I've been hungry, Hugh. Actually hungry. Do you know what that means?"

The Rio Kid's expression softened. He nodded and said humbly, "Yeh . . . yeh, I know all right. It's been my fault . . . stayin' away so long."

"What's to be done about Charlie?" Peggy asked wildly. "He didn't . . . you don't think he killed Les, do you?"

"I know he didn't. But provin' what I know is somethin' else again. Charlie's in dang near the same spot I was in three years ago . . . only Charlie wasn't give no chance to hit the trail acrost the Border like I did."

"What *did* happen that night, Hugh? No one seems to know. . . ."

"No time to talk aboot that now," he interrupted her. "I got a lot to do." He stepped backward, glancing over at Hank's still body stretched out on the bed.

"You look after Hank, an' I'll get the doctor to come by soon's he can make it. I don't reckon there's much you can do for the ol' boy till he comes back to life again."

"What happened to *him*, Hugh? What was he doing tonight when I supposed he was asleep?"

"Huntin' down rustlers . . . an' he got a bullet in his chest."

"Rustlers?" Peggy's eyes opened wide with astonishment again. "We haven't had trouble with rustlers for a long time."

"Mebby not. But here's a gang workin' hereaboots now, an' old Hank got wise to 'em somehow. He went out by hisse'f, the danged old he-wolf, an' that's what he got for his trouble. I'm gonna clean that mess up too," he added grimly, "if I can stay off the business end of a lynch rope long enough to nose aroun' some."

"Be careful, Hugh. Promise me you'll be careful." Peggy's eyes filled with tears suddenly. Her thin face was convulsed with fear. She flung herself forward in his arms and clung to him.

He patted her shoulder awkwardly, comforted her as he had done when she was a stringy long-legged kid in pigtails and had stuck a mesquite thorn in her bare foot.

"Don't cry, Sis. Ever'thing's gonna be jest fine. I swear it is. I'm stoppin' by the Bar L fust to clear up a coupla things . . . then I'll high-tail it to Chapparell and 'tend to gettin' Charlie out of jail."

"I'm glad you're going to the Bar L. I'm sure Henry will help. Oh, I forgot. He knows you, Hugh. He told me so tonight. About two years ago in Mexico . . . that must have been just before he came here and bought the Bar L. He said you and he were pretty good friends . . . that you knew you could never return home and that you'd sort of asked him to look after things here . . . the Triangle A . . . and me."

The Kid put both his hands on Peggy's shoulders and stared over her head. He muttered, "Yeh. I'm beginnin' to remember. Henry Pelham, huh? Name sounded familiar when I fust heard it."

"If you were friends in Mexico, he'll surely help you now."

"Friends?" The Rio Kid laughed harshly. He held Peggy away from him to look into her eyes. "So that's the way he talked you over . . . to jilt Charlie? By claimin' he was a friend of mine, an' hintin', I reckon, that I'd *want* you to take up with him?"

"Well . . . yes. I suppose I was influenced . . ."

THE KID dropped his hands from her shoulders. There was an ugly scowl on his face. "I've got things to say to Henry Pelham, right enough. Things that won't wait no longer." He turned on his heel and strode away.

A faint cry escaped Peggy's lips. She started after this strange gun-toting brother of hers with an outstretched hand as though she would catch him and hold him back, but she stopped abruptly in the door of the bedroom.

She couldn't stop him now. Not even if she wanted to. And she didn't. Charlie needed him. And Charlie needed her.

Her face tautened in sudden resolve. Sh hurried into her own bedroom and quickly got into her riding things. She wasted a last glance at Hank and saw he was still in his coma, then ran out of the house and to the corral. Ten minutes after the Rio Kid rode toward the Bar L to settle

accounts with Henry Pelham, Peggy was galloping madly to Chapparell to be close to the man she loved.

CHAPTER XVII

THE Rio Kid unlocked the padlocked gate in the north fence of the Bar L with a bullet, the same way he had treated the east gate. He left it swinging open behind him while he galloped on along the road leading to the Bar L headquarters.

The ranch house, the outbuildings, and the bunkhouses were all dark when he rode up into the yard. He reined Thunderbolt in in front of the bunkhouse and hallooed loudly. When that brought no response he pulled a gun and tilted the muzzle skyward, triggered it three times in swift succession.

This brought on a light in the bunkhouse almost at once. A moment later the door came open and the smooth-faced young puncher named Billy peered out, rubbing sleepy eyes and mussing his tousled hair.

"Who is it?" he called. "What's all the shooting about?"

"It's me. Pete Trobridge sent me in from Bloody Gap to rout Pelham out. All hell's broke loose tonight."

"Who are yuh?" Billy stared out into the moonlight uncertainly. "Whyn't you git off an' come into the light where I kin see yuh?"

"I'm in a hurry," the Kid told him impatiently and truthfully. "Where's Pelham?"

"What kinda hell's broke loose in Bloody Gap?"

"Plenty. Hank Greenow's got onto the Hidden Valley layout. Half-Breed Joe is daid. Likewise, Mart."

"Jumpin' Jehosaphat! Is that a fact?" breathed the youngster. "Well, I dunno. Pelham ain't here. Him an' Pat are both staying in Chapparell tonight."

"Pat?"

"Yeh. Pat Brinsted. Bar L foreman."

"What're they stayin' in Chapparell for tonight?" the Kid demanded.

"They took that Barnes feller in after he gunned Sheriff Edwards. An' bein' that left Chapparell without no sheriff, Henry Pelham was appointed temporary-like. An' he swore Pat in as his fust deputy. They stayed in town to guard the jail in case any of Barnes' friends got idees about turnin' him loose."

The Kid sat very still in the saddle and digested this astounding information. He had to admit to himself that Pelham was a fast, shrewd worker. In one stroke he had gotten rid of Edwards and Barnes and installed himself in control of the law-enforcement machinery of the county. That made the task confronting the Rio Kid doubly difficult.

He thought it over carefully while he rolled a cigarette. Billy fidgeted on first one bare foot and then the other in the lighted doorway of the bunkhouse.

The Kid struck a match to his cigarette and let the brief glare illuminate his bleak features while he sucked fire into his cigarette.

Billy yelled, "Hey! I ain't never seen you around before. What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't say." The Kid spun the dead match stick away in the moonlight.

"Well . . . what is it? How do I know you come from Pete Trobridge?"

In a taunting voice the Kid said, "You'll have to take my word for that, sonny." He changed his tone to one of rough command. "I've gotta talk to one of the Mexicans here. Where do they bunk?"

"I aint' shore that I oughtta . . ."

The Rio Kid laughed and drove a bullet into the wooden threshold between Billy's bare feet. "Make up yore mind quick, sonny. Where at are the Mexes?"

Billy yelped and spread out spraddle-legged when the bullet zinged into the floor beneath him. "Up the hill there. If I was dressed an' had me a gun . . ."

"You'd more'n likely commit suicide with it," the Kid finished for him coldly. He reined Thunderbolt away from the bunkhouse up the hillside indicated by Billy.

He slid off in front of the Mexican shacks and strode to the door of the first one. His first knock brought an instant response which indicated that the foreign field-hands were awake and fearful.

"Quien es?"

"A stranger," the Kid replied in the same language. "A friend, who must see Tonita quickly."

He heard a whispered conference going on inside the darkness of the house. Then the door opened cautiously and he stepped back into the moonlight so his features could be seen from within.

After a moment's hesitation he heard Tonita's liquid voice affirming gladly, "Si, Papa. It is him. The gringo caballero who was kind to me tonight."

"Bueno, Senor," a masculine Mexican voice answered. "Un momente and I will make the light."

The Kid waited until a match flared and was touched to the wick of a candle held in the trembling hand of the Mexican girl. Long braids of black hair framed the oval of her face, giving her a look of Madonna-like dignity; but her eyes were wide dark pools of terror, and sharp white teeth cruelly dented the soft flesh of her underlip as she restrained a cry of fear under the impact of the Kid's searching gaze.

Beyond her shoulder in the faint circle of illumination provided by the flickering candle was the grave face of her father. He pushed Tonita back gently and inclined his head courteously to the Rio Kid.

"The Senor will honor my house by entering? My Tonita has told me about meeting you earlier tonight."

THE KID nodded and stepped inside a small, frugally furnished room that was scrubbed to immaculate cleanliness. Tonita retreated before him and set the candle on wooden shelf beneath a plaster image of the Virgin Mother. The Kid awkwardly removed his hat without quite understanding the impulse that prompted his action, turned to the grave-faced father.

"A man has been accused of murder tonight, Senor. The man is my very good friend and he is innocent. I think you and your daughter know he is innocent."

"You mean the . . . Senor Barnes, no?"

"Yep. Charlie Barnes. He didn't kill Sheriff Edwards, and you know it," the Kid said bluntly.

The Mexican father spread out his work-calloused palms and lowered his eyes. "Si, Senor," he admitted humbly. "We know."

"Then why did you let them arrest him?"

"We are strangers here, from another country. Will our words be listened to, Senor? We seek only for peace . . . to be allowed to work and then return to Mexico." The old man's voice was troubled.

The Rio Kid shook his head. "But you are a *man*. You can't let an innocent man die unjustly." He paused, frowning heavily. "I think I know what happened out there on the range. I'll be damned if I can blame you. I know how some white men treat Mexican girls. I don't blame you for following Tonita tonight on your burro."

"You know that, Senor . . . also?"

"That you were out there tonight on your burro? Yeh. I figured that . . . even though Tonita did a good job of distracting my attention so I wouldn't hear you pass."

He heard a shamed gasp from Tonita's lips. He turned and saw a hot flush mantling her cheeks.

"Tonita," said her father stolidly, "is a good and dutiful daughter."

"I think she's mighty fine," the Rio Kid concurred heartily. "To damn fine for a skunk like Les Edwards. I don't blame you for killing him, but . . . are you going to stand back and let an innocent man die for it?"

The old Mexican looked bewildered. "I, Senor? You think I killed the young sheriff?"

"Didn't you?"

"No, Senor."

"Then what were you doing sneaking around out there on your burro?"

The old man folded his arms proudly. "To see that no harm came to my Tonita."

"I guessed that. All right, when Les Edwards got fresh you couldn't stand it. You shot him . . . and I don't blame you."

"But no, Senor. It was not the sheriff who made the insult for Tonita. It was he who rode up in front of me while the foreman struggled with her to steal a kiss she refused to give him."

"The foreman?" The Kid wrinkled his brow in perplexity. "You mean the Bar L foreman? Man named Pat Brinsted? Was *he* out there tonight too?"

"Si, Senor. It was the foreman who insisted my Tonita must accompany him on his ride in the night. He is the foreman, Senor. Could she refuse?"

"Holy cats," groaned the Kid. "This is getting worse mixed-up than ever. Hell, looks like it was a regular convention out there. All right, Tonita was fighting with the foreman to keep him from kissing her. Then Les Edwards popped up. What then?"

"I am trying to explain, Senor. I was watching from behind a mesquite bush, full of pain and of wrath, but also full of hope that Tonita could conquer with her own strength and not need help from me. When the sheriff saw what was happening he was very angry and shouted curses at Pat. The foreman held Tonita with his right arm and shot from his left hand as the sheriff's horse whirled away. Tonita escaped and jumped in her saddle, quirted the foreman's horse away. She ran as though pursued by a

thousand devils, and I followed, Senor, as rapidly as my burro would go."

The Kid whirled on Tonita. "Is that the truth?"

She nodded mutely.

"When I got home I counseled Tonita to say nothing about what had happened," the old man went on slowly. "The American customs are strange to us. We did not know until much later that the Senor Barnes was in trouble."

"So that's the way of it?" the Kid muttered. "Pat Brinsted killed Edwards, then he and Pelham got together and hung it on Charlie. By God, I'm glad it's that way instead of the way I thought. I hated to drag you folks into it."

"We will not have to tell what happened, Senor?" the Mexican asked gratefully.

"I don't know . . . yet. I think I can fix it so you won't have to. Sure . . . I can say I saw it happen that way. Leave you out of it." The Rio Kid's face suddenly became elated. He chuckled and slapped his thigh. "They figure they're safe because you're Mexicans and no one would believe your story. But when I tell them *I* was hid behind a mesquite bush watching the whole thing . . ." He sobered into sudden grimness. "Don't say a word to anybody," he cautioned. "If things work out right there'll be a new boss and a new foreman on the Bar L tomorrow. If things don't work out right . . . you'd better get that girl across the Border fast as you can." He shook hands with the Mexican, then turned and awkwardly held out his hand to Tonita.

When she timidly put her soft palm in his, he grasped it tightly and said in a husky undertone, "Meeting you tonight was something I'll never forget. If I ever see you again . . . I hope it'll be in the moonlight and you'll have another reason to keep me from looking around . . . like you did tonight." He turned and strode out of the door before she could reply, leaped on Thunderbolt and whirled him into the road to Chapparell.

HE FELT strong now, eager to come to grips with the forces opposed to him. Knowing it was Pat's gun that had actually killed Les Edwards ought to make things a lot easier. If Doc Conroy was serious about being able to tell what gun a bullet had been fired from, he should be able to prove Charlie Barnes' innocence by making a simple comparison.

His own innocence of the old charge was going to be harder to prove, but with this evidence of a brazen attempt to frame Charlie for Les' death, it shouldn't be so hard to convince the skeptical that he himself might also have been framed. And with the tie-up between Trobridge and Pelham in the Hidden Valley rustling deal —things were beginning to work out.

He leaned forward on Thunderbolt's sleek neck, giving the fleet black stallion his head and urging him to greater speed through the night. The end of the long trail was just ahead. The lights of Chapparell were already beginning to show dimly. It looked as if the entire town was still awake, though it was far past the normal hour when honest citizens should have been asleep.

Well, the little town had had a lot of excitement tonight, he reminded himself grimly—and was due to have a lot more.

An hour ago he would have hesitated about riding boldly into the town with all its citizens awake and watchful, but now he welcomed the accident that gave him an opportunity for a dramatic entry.

It was better this way. There'd be a clean-cut decision. He was through with skulking and hiding his face, and he felt as though a great oppressive burden had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders.

The main street was ablaze with lights and the business block was lined on both sides with saddled horses. The news had spread fast, bringing riders hurrying in from all the outlying ranches.

The jail was at the south end of town, just off the road coming in from the Bar L.

The Kid's muscles tightened when he saw the surging mob in front of the jail. Charlie's friends, he guessed gladly, knowing how popular Charlie had always been in the community. They had gathered quickly and in force to demand his release. Pelham and Pat had foreseen that contingency when they got themselves appointed to positions of authority to prevent that from happening.

The Kid pulled up on the outer fringe of the mob that was pressing closer and closer about the jail. They were shouting loudly. Angry broken phrases that he couldn't understand. No one looked at him. Every face was turned forward to the steps leading up to the jail where a small

group was gathered as though in momentous conference.

Then the Rio Kid saw his sister Peggy and he went rigid in the saddle while a strange choking crept into his throat and stayed there.

Peggy was in the center of the mob, and her thin face was tight with anguish. She appeared to be trying to force her way forward, and it looked as though she were being forcibly prevented by several rough-looking men who were strangers to him.

He didn't understand it, for Peggy was fighting with the men who held her, biting and scratching like the red-headed hellion she had always been when her temper was aroused.

The Kid pushed Thunderbolt up to the rear of the mob. He saw a familiar face. Old John Rubicum who had been a close friend of his father's. He leaned from the saddle and forcefully gripped John's shoulder.

The old man turned and stared up into his face, then gave a startled yelp of dismay. "Hugh? Hugh Aiken?"

"Yeh. It's me, John. What's goin' on? What's Peggy doin' up yonder?"

"Hugh. You've chose a hell of a night to come home. Charlie Barnes murdered Les Edwards tonight . . through the back just like you shot Les' dad. Peggy's tryin' to get to the jail to see Charlie before the mob gets to him. They won't let her. It's no place for a girl here tonight. Hell! They'll get you too, Hugh. String you up with Charlie if they see you. There's still a reward . . ."

"To hell with that. Have all of you gone crazy? Charlie didn't kill Les Edwards."

"Im afraid he did." John Rubicum shook his gray head sadly. "Doctor Conroy just made a speech from the jailhouse steps. He's damn near sober tonight. He's always claimed he's got a way of tellin' whether a bullet was fired from a certain gun. Well, he dug the slug out of Les' back . . . *and he says it was shot from the gun Charlie had borrowed and was wearing tonight.*"

CHAPTER XVIII

"IT CAIN'T be so," the Rio Kid exclaimed in utter disbelief. "Doc Conroy mus' be either drunk . . . or lyin'. Charlie never shot nobody in the back. No more," he added strongly, "than me."

John Rubicum shot him a piercing glance from under matted gray eyebrows. "Claiming you didn't kill Les' father?"

"Hell yes, I'm claimin' that. What's more, I'm gonna prove it."

Rubicum shook his head sorrowfully. "Once you're recognized by this mob I reckon you won't have much chance to prove anything. There'll be two lynchings instead of one tonight. You'd better back out quiet and get out of town quick. I'll keep my mouth shut . . . for your old daddy's sake."

For a moment the Rio Kid hesitated. His bleak gaze went searchingly over the heads of the mob to the little group of men on the iron steps leading up to Charlie's barred cell. There were four of them with their heads close together. He recognized Doctor Conroy and old Frank Hess, storekeeper and postmaster for as long as he could remember. He didn't know the other two men, but even at this distance he could see the shiny outline of law-badges pinned to their vests. Frank Pelham and his foreman, Pat Brinsted.

The cards were certainly stacked against justice tonight in Chapparell. The temper of the mob was growing steadily worse. They wouldn't be held back much longer, and the Kid shrewdly surmised that the newly appointed sheriff and his deputy would make little effort to protect their prisoner when the mob action took a violent turn.

He nodded to Rubicum slowly. "I reckon yo're right at that. Best thing I can do is get out an' save my own skin. Much obliged to you for not givin' the alarm."

He wheeled Thunderbolt about, conscious of disappointment and disgust aroused inside the old man by his action.

He trotted along behind the mob on the road leading to the safety of the Border, and none turned their heads to note his passing.

When he was well out of sight he circled to the right in a wide arc that eventually brought him back behind the jail.

The voice of the mob in front of the jail had risen to a loud and thunderous roar while he completed the maneuver. It was an incessant rumble of anger from a hundred throats, ominous in its implications of mass bloodthirst rapidly passing beyond the bounds of any human restraint. He'd seen mobs in action before and he recognized this sound as one of the last stages

before angry shouts gave way to concerted action.

He drew both guns as he stepped off Thunderbolt and unhooked his rope from the saddle. Then he approached the rear of the jail, tossed a loop of the rope over a projecting roof beam, and hauled himself up. His boots scraped, but the sound was lost in the rising tumult in front of the jail. There was, he knew, a trapdoor in the roof, and he intended letting himself down into the jail through it.

He pushed the trapdoor cautiously aside, and looked down. An unlighted corridor led back to the four barred cells that constituted Chapparell's jail. Directly under the trapdoor, rays of light flickered weirdly through the criss-crossed iron bars of the front windows, outlining the figure of a man clinging to the bars and peering out at the gathering of former friends who now demanded his life in payment for a crime committed by another. The figure of Charlie Barnes sagged pathetically, supported by outflung arms gripping the bars on either side and above his head.

The Kid rapped lightly on the edge of the trapdoor with the barrel of a .45. Charlie whirled about from the window and asked in a choked voice, "Well? Who is it?"

"It's me, Charlie. I come to tell you . . ."

"Hugh! You'd better get away. Quick! You can't do anything. The mob's gettin' worse. An' Pelham an' Brinsted don't even aim to *try* to keep 'em away. I heard 'em talkin' an' laughin' about it 'while ago."

"I ain't worryin' none aboot the new sheriff an' his depity," the Kid grated. "I'm goin' out there now. An' Charlie, I thought you'd like to know . . . Peggy's out yonder fightin' to get to you."

He turned quickly away from the trapdoor, got his rope, knotted it carefully so he wouldn't slide down too fast and draw the attention of the men outside before he was ready for them. Holding a gun in one hand, he let himself down with the other, and strode to the door leading out to the little platform in full view of the angry mob. For a brief moment he hesitated with both guns held in front of him, then with a look of grim determination he kicked the door open and went out.

HENRY PELHAM whirled at the sound of the opening door. He faced the muzzle of two .45's and a pair of glittering eyes in a saturnine face that was vaguely familiar to him.

The Rio Kid grated, "Hist yore hands, Pelham . . . quick! An' you too, Mister," to Pat, backing up his command by leveling a gun on each of them.

They reluctantly hoisted their hands above the head, and the roar of the mob quickly subsided to a low murmur as men pushed forward and turned to ask their neighbors what was happening on the platform.

Frank Hess and Doc Conray both turned to look at the Kid. The old storekeeper's jaw sagged and he bent closer to give his aged eyes a chance to tell him he wasn't seeing what he thought he saw. But that didn't help any. The face of the gunman was still that of Hugh Aiken.

In a faltering tone he ejaculated, "Hugh! By gorry, is that you?"

"It's me, right enough, Frank. But you can call me the Rio Kid now. An' don't none of you forget that the Kid is sorta handy with his guns." The Kid's voice was icy, a low ominous tone that carried clearly down into the front ranks of his old neighbors pressing forward to get at the jail.

A tide of excited muttering and conjecture surged back over the tight-packed mob as those in front passed the word along that Hugh Aiken had returned, dared to face them now with his guns on the new sheriff and his deputy.

The Kid knew that guns were being trained on him from below, that the slightest untoward movement would bring a hail of death from the mob, but he turned his attention to Doctor Conroy and demanded, "Why'd you lie aboot Charlie's gun shootin' the bullet that killed Les Edwards?"

"So you're Hugh Aiken?" Conroy squinted at him and pursed his lips. "It wasn't necessary for me to lie. I fired a test bullet from the gun Charlie was carrying tonight and under the microscope it was identical with the bullet I took from Les."

"Whose gun was it? Charlie never carried one."

"See here, you!" Pelham burst out. "I don't know who you are nor why you're horning in . . ."

The Kid interrupted him with a sardonic laugh. "You know who I am awright, Pelham. We met oncet before . . . across the Border. You weren't an honest rancher then . . though jest as honest as you are now, I reckon. You were runnin' with

Pedro Salazar's crowd . . . tryin' to figger a way to get a good price for the cattle Pedro was rustlin' across the Border. Well, I reckon you figgered that out. Half-Breed Joe was one of Pete's gang, an' yore sidekick here was another. Only, he allus wore two guns in them days. Where's yore other gun?" he demanded fiercely of Pat, who had only a right-hand holster at his hip.

"What's it to you?" Pat snarled. "You ain't gonna live long enuff . . ."

The Kid made a menacing gesture with his gun and Pat subsided to silence.

He reminded Conroy, "I asked you a question a minute ago. Whose gun was Charlie totin'?"

"One he borrowed from a Bar L hand, I believe. So Mr. Pelham said. A man named Mart, wasn't it, Mr. Pelham?"

"That's right." Pelham turned and faced the mob and shouted angrily, "This man's an outlaw with a price on his head. Are you going to let him . . . ?"

The Kid tipped his hat back, stepping forward and forcing Pelham back.

"Yeh. It's me. The Rio Kid. Hugh Aiken that use ta be. I'm provin' right now that Charlie Barnes didn't kill Les Edwards. When I get done with that I'm gonna prove that I didn't kill Les' daddy. If some of you'll come up here on the platform . . ."

He glimpsed the face of a man in the mob who was working his way forward, swift movement and the glint of moonlight on a leveled gun. He fired before he finished speaking, and the man sagged forward to his knees.

"That was Pete Trobridge I jest shot," the Kid shouted above the tumult of excited questions. "He figgered on shuttin' my mouth 'fore I proved it was him that gunned Sheriff Edwards three years ago instead of me. Bring him up here, some of you, an' if he stays alive long enough I'll make him admit it."

John Rubicum was one who took the initiative below. He was respected by all the ranchers and they followed his lead when he pushed forward to Pete Trobridge's side saying, "Come on, men. Give Hugh Aiken his say. He's not trying to run away this time. Won't hurt anything to hold off a minute and see what's what."

The Kid stepped back and waited while Rubicum and two others lifted Trobridge's prostrate body and carried him to the stairs.

He turned to Conroy and said quietly, "Where's the gun that killed Edwards?"

"It's right inside the jail. Belt and all for evidence."

"Get it an' bring it out," the Kid snapped.

SOMETHING in his voice made the doctor obey without hesitation. He emerged with the gun-belt in his hands as Rubicum and the others got the saloonkeeper from Bloody Gap to the platform. The Kid's bullet had smashed Trobridge's left groin and he collapsed into a moaning heap when they let him down.

The Kid nodded to Rubicum and the two others who had known him as a youth. "You-all with Frank Hess will hafta be a sort of unofficial jury," he told them. "I reckon you've all been told that Charlie Barnes is proved guilty of killin' Les with this gun he'd borrowed from a Bar L rider named Mart?" He took the gun-belt from Conroy and held it up for them to see.

They nodded, and Pelham snarled, "Are you men going to stand here and listen to this renegade . . . this murderer?"

"Yeh," the Kid replied for them unemotionally. "They're gonna listen, Pelham. So're you."

He turned to Conroy. "Mart's the man that busted into the Bloody Gap saloon tonight . . . callin' for you to come to tend Les Edwards. Remember, Doc?"

"Of course I remember. You killed him."

"Not till he went for *both* his guns. That right, Doc?"

"Yes. Oh, it was fair enough . . ."

"That's not what I mean. He was wearin' *two* guns, Doc. But still this here is s'posed to be the gun Charlie'd borrowed from him . . . the gun that *you say yourself* killed Les Edwards."

"I did say so. I can prove it."

"I reckon this gun did kill Les. *But it ain't the gun Charlie* borrowed from Mart tonight. Mart was wearin' both his later. But here's a two-gun man half undressed." The Kid gestured savagely toward Pat Brinsted who was listening, open-mouthed. "Lackin' a left-hand gun," the Kid went on. "An' this here's a left-hand gun. Provin' more'n ever that Charlie couldn't of killed Les with it. All of you know Charlie cain't shoot for shucks right-handed . . . let alone with his left."

When the ranchers nodded frowning

agreement Henry Pelham raised his voice on a note of high indignation. "Did you switch guns, Pat? Without telling me a word? By God . . ." He went for his guns swiftly, hoping in the excitement to seal Pat's lips with a bullet and thus throw all the blame on his foreman.

The Kid was looking for some such trickery, and he smashed Pelham's kneecap with a bullet that sent the Bar L rancher floundering to the platform while Pat Brinsted cursed his former boss viciously.

"Tryin' to put it off on me, huh? You tol' me to switch them guns to lay the killin' on Barnes. God damn yore hide . . ."

"That clears Charlie." The Rio Kid wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. "I saw Pat Brinsted kill Les with his left-hand gun," he explained to the open-mouthed ranchers. "I knowed I could prove it if I got hold of the gun an' had a chanct to show you.

"Now, you come to me . . . an' Pete Trobridge layin' there aboot to die. You ain't got long to live, Pete. You ready to tell the truth aboot what happened on the trail that night three years ago?"

The wounded saloon-keeper's only reply was a surly curse accompanied by a groan of pain.

"Awright," said the Kid, "then *I'll* tell it. You men remember it was Pete that claimed he saw me that night. He proved it by describin' a new scarf I was wearin'. Awright, he *did* see me . . . *after* he'd awready killed Sheriff Edwards. I only met one man that night . . . *before* I come on Sheriff Edwards daid in the trail. That man had to be Pete Trobridge, else how could he've described my new scarf so perfect?"

"But why?" burst out John Rubicum and Frank Hess in unison. "Pete didn't have any quarrel with Sheriff Edwards."

"I didn't figger that out myself until tonight," Hugh Aiken admitted. "But where Edwards was killed was on the trail leading up to Hidden Valley. Trobridge has been herdin' rustled cattle in Hidden Valley for three years. He musta thought Edwards had got wise an' was headin' for the hideout. There's a herd there right now," he went on swiftly. "All yearlin' stuff an' branded with a big new Bar L. Pedro Salazar in Mexico, Pete Trobridge in Bloody Gap, an' Henry Pelham on the Bar L have been workin' it together. That's how Pelham has got rich so fast . . . buyin' back rustled stuff from Salazar at half price, which is more'n Salazar could get anywhere else.

"Salazar rustles the spring calf crop all up an' down the Border before brandin' time," the Kid continued his involved explanation. "He holds 'em in Mexico all winter an' slaps a Bar L brand on. Come spring, they push the rustled yearlin's *back* acrost the Border up through the desert to Bloody Gap an' down into Hidden Valley . . . then into the Bar L range at night. That's why Pelham keeps his gates locked . . . to keep out too many stray visitors that might notice how damn many new yearlin's pop up all of a sudden each spring."

"By God, son, it sounds reasonable," breathed Frank Hess. "Le's lock these fellers up an' get Charlie outta there."

The Kid stepped back and holstered his guns with a sigh when there was a concerted forward movement toward the three men who had hoodwinked Chapparell completely for three years.

Peggy came up the stairs in a rush and threw her arms about his neck, and did not relinquish her hold until Charlie Barnes emerged from the jail and stood looking at her with an awkward smile on his broad face.

John Rubicum approached the Rio Kid diffidently, followed by a group of ranchers, all of whom looked abashed and uncomfortable.

Glittering in Rubicum's outstretched palm was the sheriff's badge that had a few minutes previously been rudely ripped from Pelham's vest, and Rubicum cleared his throat twice before saying:

"We been talking it over and we're asking you to put this on and wear it, Hugh. After the job you've done tonight there's no man we'd be prouder to have wear it."

Though the Kid's eyes were shining, he shook his head and backed away. "That's too big a jump all of a sudden from the Rio Kid. God A'mighty, John, I'd be goin' for my guns ever' time I looked in a mirror an' saw that star reflected. Besides which, I'll be makin' a ride back to El Paso purty soon, I reckon. There's a gal there that's waitin' to know how I come out. Mebby," his voice softened as he glanced at Peggy held tightly in Charlie's arms, "we can fix up a double weddin' . . . an' if she wants to settle down here I'll shore be proud to pin on that star."

Mike drilled the bandit in the back as he ran down the street.

LAWMAN'S GUNSMOKE GOODBYE

by BRETT AUSTIN

Mike Hunter, grizzled gundog of Limas town, knew that he must give his star to a younger man. But he didn't know that Brett Sneed and his gun-wolf pack were planning to celebrate his funeral with powdersmoke and bank robbery.

NOW THE SUN had set, and an evening chill crept down from the snow-tipped Highwood Mountains that entirely encircled Lismas town. And, though the evening air was sharp, old Sheriff Mike Hunter, seated in his easy chair on the porch of the Sheriff's

Office, made no move to pull his buckskin coat tighter across his heavy shoulders. A gaunt, gray man, he sat there in the Montana dusk, toying with his thoughts. And finding in his musings no pleasure.

For tomorrow, he was giving up his badge. Tomorrow he would deposit all the duties, all the obligations, of his office upon his deputy, honest Ben Truscott. And, secretly, he was worried.

Not that he didn't trust Truscott. For ten years, Truscott had been an able deputy. Mike Hunter had been sheriff for thirty years, and in those three decades he'd never met a more competent deputy than Truscott. No, it wasn't that....

Then what was it? What caused this unrest inside him? Here he was—sixty-two years old. And he had long looked forward to this day when he could put aside his badge and his .45—and take up his catch-rope and saddle on his A Lazy V Bar spread. And now that day had finally arrived....

But he had to quit, he told himself. There was no use kidding himself. He was old, and the years rode heavily on him. His bones, his muscles, had lost their energy, their alertness. He tired easily. The old rawhide was gone.

He had to do as he was doing, voluntarily resigning. He had to be honest to the voters that had re-elected him these thirty past years—

He had to that....for their sake.

SUDDENLY, the sound of approaching bootheels cut short his thoughts. Now the night's shadows parted and a man—big and young and broad-shouldered—came forward and halted there on the steps. He looked at Hunter.

"Mike," Ben Truscott began slowly, "I've been thinkin' that maybe you shouldn't give up your star. An' the rest of the people hereabouts—"

"Sit down," Mike Hunter interrupted gruffly.

Truscott lumbered across the porch. The dry flooring creaked under his weight. The chair creaked, too, as he lowered his enormous bulk into it. He tried again with, "This county needs you, Mike."

"Maybeso," Mike Hunter admitted.

Truscott sat there, looking over Leedy, and Mike Hunter studied his deputy's honest, open face. This Truscott, he knew, was a man of slow, deliberate thought. He was stubborn, and entirely lacking in imagination. But he was a man's man for all that, and Mike Hunter knew that.

"I wish you'd reconsider," Truscott said slowly.

Mike Hunter said, "Let's not talk any more about that, Ben."

Truscott took this into his mind, wrestling with it, his jaw grinding his fine-cut tobacco almost angrily. Then the stubbornness arose again in him, drew hard lines in his heavy face, and he said:

"Damnit, Man, you can't quit!"

"But I am quitting," Hunter said.

Truscott said, "By Heavens, I oughta quit. Then they'd have nobody to put in your place. Then you'd have to keep on! I been talkin' with Jane, Mike. Your wife ain't askin' you to quit. Neither does the town-council, the business-men, the ranchers. Nobody wants you to quit!"

Hunter smiled and said, "See you come mornin', Ben," and went down the steps. His gray gelding was tied to the hitchrack beyond the plank sidewalk; he reined the animal in tightly, stuck the square-toe of his Justin boot into the Visalia stirrup, swung into the hull and rode down the main street. There was a small

white house on the corner of Main and Cottonwood streets and there he dismounted, glancing at the team and wagon standing beside the gate—the wagon loaded with furniture and various household fixtures. A kerosene lamp burned inside. The door was open.

"Safe to come in?" he asked.

"You're just in time," a woman's voice said and he entered.

Except for the table, the rest of the furniture was gone; the floors looked barren without the rugs, and the walls seemed high and wide without the pictures.

"In time for what?"

The man said, "To help me with this table."

The table was made of heavy hardwood and was too wide for the door and would have to be laid on its side and taken through that way. The man wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand.

They got the table through and loaded it upon the wagon. The woman followed behind, her arms filled with odds and ends. She was a medium-built, fine-featured woman and she had a small face—wrinkled with age now—and her once brown hair was now completely gray.

HUNTER took her burden and put the articles into the wagon.

"Tired?" he asked.

She nodded.

He helped her up into the high wagon seat and then he told the man: "I'll be out the ranch directly, Carl. How's things out there?"

"We got all the furniture except this load inside, Mike. We got it in purty respectable order."

Hunter told his wife, "You go right to bed, Honey. I'll bet you're dog tired," and then again to the man, "We'll unload this load come mornin', Carl."

Then he mounted his gray and sat in the saddle and watched the wagon lumber into the night. Then he looked at the house—it seemed suddenly desolate and as devoid of life as though it had known no occupants for years—and then he turned the gray toward the office.

Truscott still sat upon the porch. He said nothing as Hunter rode up and Hunter sat in saddle, evaluating his successor. Truscott lacked but one essential necessary to the successful lawman. That was an inability to put himelf into the lawbreaker's boots, the inability to reason a situation from the criminal's viewpoint. Suddenly Hunter wondered if the lack of this innate sense would be much of a hindrance to Truscott.

"I'm headin' out to the ranch, Ben," he said. "I'll be in come mornin'. You keep an eye on the town?"

"I sure will," Truscott assured him.

This town of Lismas had once been a brawdy, hell-roaring trailtown. But those days had passed with the passage of the longhorn, the buffalo, the Indian and the Indian fighter. Now the range produced whitefaced Herefords, buffalo-bones dotted the ranges, the Indians were on reservations and the Indian fighter, that long-haired man of the saddle, had gone to his just rewards.

The guns of Mike Hunter had tamed the town, had brought peace and order.

There had been no serious trouble since two years before when Hunter and Truscott had a run-in with the Brett Sneed gang, had sent the leader, Sneed, to Deer Lodge for life, had left the remaining members of Sneed's longriders lying dead in Shotgun Gorge.

The distance between Lismas and the Hunter A Lazy V Bar was five miles. Hunter rode slowly, letting the gray jog through the night. The house held no lights when he arrived.

He sat for some time in the kitchen, the lamp wicked low; then he climbed the creaking stairs, but he slept little and sunup found him riding down Lismas' main street.

But already the town showed activity. The swamper who worked in the Gilded Lady was sweeping the big porch of that emporium of hard liquor, hard games and harder ladies. Ching Woo nodded as he entered his Rialto restaurant. Big Jim Harrison, reporter, editor, publisher, printer and advertising man for the Harrison owned Lismas Ledger, stood on the street corner, puffing his cigar rather savagely. Hunter knew there was something in the wind just by looking at the up-tilt of the cigar.

"This true what I've heard about Brett Sneed, Mike?"

"What've you heard?"

"They say Sneed's busted Deer Lodge. Got hol' of a cutter an' gunned his way over the wall. You hear anythin' about it, Mike?"

Hunter nodded. "Notice from the warden came a coupla days ago." He made to turn his horse and Harrison planted an ink-stained hand on the bridle-reins and Hunter asked: "Well?"

FOR once the garrulous newspaper-man seemed to find speech difficult, then he finally blurted out:

"What if Sneed rides this way?"

"Why should he ride this way?"

"Why, damnit, man!" Harrison said. "You jailed Brett Sneed. You sent him to Deer Lodge. You put him behin' bars. An' you know Sneed as well as I know him. He boasted they'd never get him alive. An' you busted his boast all to hell. He'll come back, I tell you—!"

Hunter smiled. He said, "Don't let your imagination run away with you, Harrison," and he rode toward his office.

But there was meat in Harrison's words. Sneed was tough—a killer, an outlaw. Now, with the galling humiliation of a prison-sentence behind him, he would be more than ever a cold-blooded killer.

Hunter thought from Sneed's viewpoint. He, Hunter, had jailed Sneed and, like Harrison had said, Sneed had openly boasted that no lawman would take him alive, no tin badge would ever slam a cell-door in his face. But Hunter had taken him alive and put him behind a cell-door.

Sneed was brutal, domineering. Powerful of body; strong of will. His word was as good as his gold. Whatever he said he made good. He had boasted he would never be taken alive. Yet Hunter had taken him—alive.

That prison term had hurt Sneed's body, true. But the stretch behind bars was not a physical galling thing to this outlaw-leader. The thing that hurt most was not physical, it was mental: Hunter, by jailing him, had made his word worthless, had made him, because of his boast, the laughing-stock of the owlhoot trail. Hunter had humiliated Brett Sneed and that thought cut deep into the man's stubborn pride.

Hunter secretly figured that Sneed would ride back toward Lismas. But he had not, of course, known this when he had tendered his resignation. Sneed then had been behind bars.

Hunter was not dodging the issue now. The thing was that, by a

strange quirk of nature, Sneed's break from Deer Lodge had coincided with Hunter's resignation—almost to the date, in fact.

So Hunter let it go at that—maybe he had figured wrong—he hoped so.

Truscott was not in the office. But another man waited in the hall—a heavy-set man with his California pants stuck into the tops of his Justin half-boots, a man marked by the saddle. He was Tom Garvin, cattleman, county commissioner. They offered greetings and Hunter unlocked the office door. Garvin sat down stiffly.

"You're up with the hoot-owls," Hunter said.

Garvin said, "Not up early enough!" His gray eyes met those of Hunter's. "You gone loco, Mike?"

"When you eat loco weed," Hunter said drily, "you stand like a mad bull—your horns swingin, your eyes bloodshot—you're lookin' for a fight. Do I look proddy, Tom?"

GARVIN went straight to the point. "First I figgered that notice you sent me was some kind of a joke so I paid it no attention. You quittin', that was a good one! It made me smile. I showed it as a joke to my round-up crew. Then yesterday Matt Wyler rode into my Lone Pine camp an' said it was the honest to Hannah truth!"

"Fifty miles from here to Lone Pine," Hunter said.

"We rode it last night—"

"We?"

"I pulled my whole damn crew off. We shoved the cattle in Lone Pine corrals. I called in my circle-riders. Even the hawss-jingler rode in."

"What you aim to do with your men in town?"

"Don't rush me," Garvin said. "Are you really quittin', Mike?"

Hunter looked out the fly-specked window. He could see the sidewalk from where he stood and he saw Truscott coming toward the office.

"It's true," he said.

Garvin stood now, stood looking at his big hands; then he crossed the room and put his hand on Hunter's shoulder.

"But why, Mike? Why?"

Hunter said nothing. Could he tell him that he was old, that long rides made his bones ache, that he tired easily now, that his muscles were turning soft, that he was not the man he used to be when he was ten years younger—when he was Garvin's age. No, he couldn't do that—he couldn't let anybody know that. He had to keep that to himself. He had to be honest with himself—he had his pride, too.

"How old are you, Tom?"

"Fifty-one. Why?"

Hunter said, "You couldn't even read your own brand on one of your own steers," and then he heard Truscott outside: "Come in, Ben."

Garvin never understood him. He said, "Good mornin', Ben," and then to Hunter, "Well, you're old enough to know your own min', though I sure hate to see it. I'm buyin' 'em, Men. I'm givin' the party to the best lawman to ever strap on a cutter. Outside an' across the street to the Gilded Lady."

They crossed the street. Hunter handed Truscott the badge and, there beside the bar, Garvin, as county commissioner, swore Truscott into office. The drinks went the rounds. The word spread like fire through dry grama grass. They sent out riders to tell the cow outfits, the sheep camps, the prospectors.

Wagons and buggies came into town. Pioneer women, gray-haired, rode on buckboard seats beside sons

and daughters and their grandchildren; oldsters who had driven longhorn steers up the Bridger and Powder River trails—saddle-warped, weather-beaten men astraddle tough horseflesh.

Tom Garvin said, "Let's move this shindig out to the A Lazy V Bar so Jane can get in on it."

Somebody boosted a whiskey barrel into a spring-wagon. Then the buggies, the buckboards, the lumber wagons turned toward the Hunter ranch. By noon, save for the men in the Gilded Lady, the town was deserted. Stores, restaurants, the leather shop—all were closed. Even the bank, there on the corner, was locked, its shades pulled low.

Mike Hunter drank little. He had no love for whiskey. He drank some, true, but he always managed his usual restraint. Talk ensued. Monte, the barkeeper, rolled out a barrel. By sheer brawn he lifted it alone upon the bar. They were out of glasses. Ching Woo got some from his restaurant.

"To Mike Hunter, lawman."

GLASSES raised, then lowered slowly, untouched. For the beat of fastly approaching horse-hoofs sounded on the town outskirts. One rider, Mike Hunter reasoned; one rider, using his spurs. But why ride so fast in such horse-killing heat?

Soon he had his answer. The rider flanked his bronc. He was bareheaded and riding bareback.

"They held up the Clear Spring stage-station! They killed Will Stacey—shot him down in cold blood!"

Glasses went untasted to the bar. The men followed Mike Hunter outside.

"Who did it, Jay?"

"Brett Sneed and his gang!"

"His gang?"

"He had two men with him."

"Sure it was Sneed?"

"Sure as I'm a foot high."

Truscott swung into saddle. He jabbed a blunt forefinger at his men. "You—an' you—an' you—no, not you, Myers; you got a woman an' kids. Six of you's enough." He said to Hunter: "We'll get him, Mike."

They rode out fast.

They watched them go. They stood there saying nothing. They were thinking of Will Stacey. A harmless old reprobate, the stage company had given him the caretaker job because he was too old to tool the ribbons on the dangerous mountain curves.

But Mike Hunter's thinking went beyond theirs. Stacey was dead. That much he knew. But what was the percentage in killing him? In robbing the stage-station? Stacey was only an old man—he had little or nothing in his possession.

"Well," Garvin said, "that's that. Ben'll take care of it." He looked at them and then went on, "Might just as well pull out for the A Lazy V Bar with the rest. We don't want to spoil their fun."

They rode out then, leaving the deserted town behind them.

But word of Stacey's death must have traveled ahead. Men stood in groups, talking. And the gaiety seemed rather forced.

Though he tried not to, Hunter could think of nothing but Sneed. Why had Sneed killed old Stacey? Was it because Stacey was so well-known and so well-liked? But how would that tie in with—?

He had it then. Sneed had killed Stacey to draw the law out of Lismas. Then, with the law riding toward Clear Spring station, Sneed and his

men would swing wide and head into Lismas and rob the bank.

And why would Sneed do this? Why? Because Sneed wanted revenge. Hunter had made him eat crow. Hunter had jailed him.

Now Sneed would rob Hunter's bank while he was making a fool out of the law. That would be the killing blow. Rob the Lismas bank while Hunter was out looking for him. That would make up for that prison term. That would be worse than death to Hunter—Hunter, the lawman who couldn't be fooled!

Evidently Sneed had known of his resignation. And the resignation made Sneed's contemplated victory greater. For now the town was deserted. The townspeople were at the Hunter A Lazy V Bar toasting Mike Hunter. There would be absolutely no opposition in Lismas.

Hunter toyed with the idea. He tried to brush it aside. It was crazy, he told himself: idiotic, stupid. It would never work—or would it? He thought it through again, the little voice inside saying: Sneed wants revenge. He killed Stacey to get you and most of the townspeople out on a manhunt. Now he'll rob this bank—rob it because you jailed him.

NOBODY saw him leave. He saddled the gray and rode out, clinging to the ravines. Here the terrain grew rougher and, high on a timbered slope, he drew his blowing horse into the brush, dismounted and took his field-glasses from his saddle-pocket.

His muscles ached. He was breathing hard, himself, and his hands trembled slightly from exertion. He laid on his belly, looking over the abyss.

Many times before this spot had proven its worth. From here he had followed the course of many lawbreakers, then ridden across country and intercepted them. The landscape unfurled below. Cattle. Horses. Some black-tail deer. A ranch-house. He found the Clear Spring trail.

He followed it with his glasses.

Yonder, on a grade, toiled Truscott and his posse. Hunter swung his glasses ahead, past Clear Spring Station, into the timbered reaches of the Highwoods. Brett Sneed and his riders were two miles straight north of the station. They were headed toward Lismas. There were three of them.

They traveled a different trail than that of Truscott. Hunter understood instantly. He watched Truscott and his men ride up to the station.

He saw them dismount and examine the trail for tracks. Then they swung again to leather and rode on, heading into the mountains, their backs toward Lismas. Hunter knew then he was right.

Sneed was no fool. He had deliberately ridden away from Lismas, ridden into the mountains as though leaving the country. Then, in a few miles, he and his men had left the well-traveled trail, had ridden into another gorge and turned right around and rode toward Lismas.

Sneed's reasoning was simple—and sufficient. He would draw the law in a long, round-about chase and then, while the law was ferreting out his trail, he would loot the Lismas bank and ride out, leaving Mike Hunter holding the sack. And Ben Truscott fell for the bait.

Hunter mounted. He sent his bronc down the slant, heading across country. He rode through thick brush clumps; a reckless rider, running against time.

His bronc was blowing hard when he reached the canyon.

Ahead, a black-tailed buck deer came smoothly from the brush and wandered along, nipping the grass along the trail, up the wind from him. Suddenly the buck came to attention, his long ears up.

For a moment the animal stood there, listening. Then it leaped silently into the brush and disappeared. Then Mike Hunter heard the sound of hoofs on rock, heard the low mutter of men's voices. Three riders rounded the far bend, settled aslant in saddles.

Mike Hunter got to his feet, taking silent stock of the situation. He hitched his guns around—he felt a little stiff after that hard ride—and he flexed his fingers slowly. Then he stepped into the trail, braced his legs wide, his Colts up and ready.

"That's far enough," Mike Hunter said. "Now up with those hands!"

The three longriders stared at Mike Hunter, stared at his two guns, then looked at one another, surprise in their eyes. Brett Sneed said: "By hell, Hunter, I figgered we'd ditched you back in the rough country?"

HUNTER said tersely, "Your arithmetic's haywire, Sneed. You ain't robbin' no Lismas bank!"

Sneed looked again at his companions, that same surprise in his glance, then he looked again at Hunter.

"By Hell, Hunter, I don't know how you do it!" he said, and then he went for his guns.

It did not last long. It could not last long. Hunter's first bullets sent Sneed falling over unfired guns. The square-jawed rider brought up his guns—the weapons spoke once—and they missed widely. Then the square-jawed man was dead on the trail beside Sneed. And the third rider held his hands high, his gun still leathered, his face pale under the tan.

Hunter said, "Keep your hands up thataway," and he went forward. He took the man's gun from holster and then, holding the weapon on the man, he said, "Dismount an' get to work."

He made the outlaw catch the two horses, made him tie the bodies of Sneed and the square-jawed man to their saddles. Then he tied the man's hands behind him and he led the two horses, making the prisoner ride ahead.

Two miles farther, Truscott and the posse caught up with him, staring at his party in amazement.

"We heard shootin'," Truscott said. He ordered: "Ride ahead with that outfit," and he and Hunter dropped behind. He looked at Hunter, his face serious; yet holding a sort of disgust.

"They out-guessed me, Mike."

Hunter said, "You just guessed wrong, Ben."

Truscott said, thoughtfully: "I'm no leader, Mike. I—I—well, I'm no general—I'm the guy who carries out orders—"

Hunter nodded.

"An' Mike, I know what you been thinkin' about. I know why you quit. Sure, you've never said a word to me, to anybody—but Mike, you're not so damned old—"

"Old?" Mike Hunter asked.

Truscott looked at him. "Sure, we never said it—but we figgered it that way an'—"

Mike Hunter said, "Maybe I oughta take another whack at it. You know," he continued, "I don't know what's wrong with me, Ben. But I just had to ride out—" he fumbled for words, found them: "Sixty-two years old ain't too danged old, is it Ben?"

"Hell, no!" Ben Truscott said.

THE END

Musset whirled about and shot the youngster through the heart.

LEAD SLUGS FOR GOLD THIEVES

by J. LANE LINKLATER

Because young Frank Henson handed over his gold claim to Musset's killers without a fight, men said that he was yellow. But that was before Bill Ogden and his daughter gave the younker something that could be repaid only in the hot coin of his flaming guns.

FRANK HENSON knew with the first sound of crashing brush that he was in for trouble. He was still down on his knees as the brush broke open and three men emerged from under the low boughs of a live oak. They headed toward him.

Frank stood up, a small miner's pick in his hand.

The three men were sloshing across the swift-running creek. They reached the bank, strode toward him. The first man, the leader, was shorter than the others, but thick-chested, powerful.

The leader said to Frank: "Git off'n here! And stay off!"

Frank stared at him. "This is my claim, Musset," he said quietly. "You know that."

The man called Musset laughed.

"It's our'n now," he said. "So git off!"

"But the law says—"

"The law!" Musset turned to his pals. "Did yer hear that, boys? This lad is talking about the law!"

They all laughed. Frank Henson knew they could afford to laugh. The law rarely touched this section of the Mother Lode country; the ultimate law here was brute force.

Musset and his pals had the claim just across the creek, but they had decided that Frank's claim was the richer one, and they wanted it, so they were merely taking it over.

Frank stood straight, and stared at them unblinking. But he knew that he would not fight. He knew that he should, regardless of the odds, but he wouldn't. He was a tall, well-set-up lad, fair-featured. He wasn't afraid, but he just didn't want to fight. It was a queer pride with which his forebears had endowed him, a pride that bound his arms as well as his will, and made him turn away from a threat instead of meeting it with gun or fists.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" growled Musset.

Frank started to move away. He swung his pick. Musset mistook the movement for a gesture of hostility and crashed his fist into Frank's face. Frank was downed. Neither Musset nor the others waited for him to get up; they set on him with fists and feet, beat him, slugged all consciousness out of him.

The shadows of the dead day were hanging over him when Frank's eyes opened. Dimly, he recalled what had happened, and painfully got up. He bathed his face in the chill waters of the creek.

Musset and the others were gone. No need for them to stay around. Their battle was won. Frank's claim was theirs now—theirs by right of force. They would now be back in the roaring town of Sullivan's Hat, three miles over the rolling foothills.

Frank's belongings—his pans, his tools, his grub, his blankets—had all been dumped into the swirling creek.

There was nothing for him but to trudge to Sullivan's Hat.

IT TOOK him nearly an hour to come within sight of the town. Over a bald hilltop a rough road swept into the town. From the hilltop, in the darkness, he could see little of it. There were no lights except for the glimmers that streaked thinly through open doors.

Frank Henson sat on a knoll beside the road and gazed down into the shambling pile of make-shifts which was Sullivan's Hat. This was a queer place, he reflected, for him to be. He had been born into the refined, well-ordered life of a prosperous Pennsylvania family. Yet, as he grew into manhood, he found that he did not fit there, either. In his quiet secret way, he rebelled against the easy comfort and the pale pleasures of the placid existence into which life had set him down.

He remembered vividly, now, his sudden inspired will to leave. He remembered how aghast his dignified father had been when he told him that he was going west. He remembered the cold stare of astonishment in the eyes of the beautiful girl who had expected to marry him. He remembered the strained skepticism of his polished friends.

His mother, he thought, might have understood, but she was dead.

So he had left them. He had endured that wild tossing journey on the ancient ship that carried several hundred gold-mad emigres all the way around the Horn. He had landed

in San Francisco months later, shattered and weak—but happy. He had trudged the long weary trail around the Bay, up through Sacramento, and all along the Mother Lode.

And now he was here, and he knew he should be on his way again. Yet he realized even then that he didn't want to leave Sullivan's Hat. True, the town had everything he disliked and shrank from; noise and blatant vulgarity and senseless brawling. But beyond all that it had something else that fascinated him, held him tight in the grip of its power.

Frank Henson despised the uncouth and ill-mannered crudities of Sullivan's Hat, but he loved the vast rumbling blood-quickening vitality of the place.

No, he didn't want to leave it!

He again got to his feet, stretched his aching muscles and trod wearily down the road.

He limped into the first saloon he came to. This was Bill Ogden's place. As Frank entered, he could hear the roar of Bill's great voice above the din, and see Bill's shaggy head above the crowd. Bill, more than anyone else in Sullivan's Hat, fascinated him. There were seven hundred men in Sullivan's Hat—heroes and cowards, renegade preachers and truant cowboys and runaway sailors—but none of them so typified the town, it seemed to Frank, as did Bill Ogden.

Quietly, Frank edged through the crowd to one end of the bar. This was no polished mahogany bar; just a heavy wide oaken plank, supported by a barrel at each end.

Bill Ogden, looming huge behind the bar, eyed him keenly. And Frank knew that already the news of his lost claim had got around. Musset and his pals wouldn't trouble to conceal what they had done; indeed, they would boast about it.

Their drunken voices had already bragged of their bare-faced robbery.

Bill put a bottle in front of Frank, and Frank opened his almost empty cowhide pouch. This was the rule in Sullivan's Hat, as in other Mother Lode settlements. A pinch of gold dust for a swig of liquor. The bartender simply took as much dust as he could hold between thumb and forefinger. It made liquor come pretty high, but nobody cared.

Bill looked at Frank's poke and shook his head. "Better keep it, son."

Frank closed the pouch and pushed it across at Bill. "Keep it all," he said, "and I'll take a couple."

Bill shrugged. He leaned over, his head thrust out, his big hands spread on the bar. "They didn't leave you much, did they? What are you going to do about it?"

"About what?"

"That there claim—the one that Musset and his pals, Lang and Ketch, took away from you?"

"Nothing."

BILL OGDEN stared at him in queer silence. Frank had a feeling that Bill liked him—or at least wanted to—and that, in a way, the big man secretly looked up to him, respected his superior bearing. But just now there was a hint of contempt and of disappointment in his eyes.

"You got to take care of yourself in this here country, my boy," he said roughly. "You got to fight!"

Frank merely nodded. "You think there's a chance of getting a job here?" he asked.

Bill was frankly amazed. "A job!"

"Certainly. I have no claim to work and you know I'm not likely to get one—anyhow, not one I can

hold. I've got to live, so I want a job. What's wrong with that?"

"A job!" Bill muttered again. "What c'n you do?"

"I could keep books."

"Books!" gasped Bill. "Books! What would anyone want with a bookkeeper in Sullivan's Hat!"

"Well, then, perhaps I could work for you!"

"For me! You mean, work in the bar room here?"

"Why not?"

Bill Ogden wagged his head in astonishment. "Well, you c'd kind of clean up around, and even handle the bottle, but — well, let's see your hands."

Frank put his hands on the bar, palms up. Bill squinted at them. They were calloused and dirty, but the fingers were long and slender.

Bill laughed and shook his head. "I'd lose money on every drink!"

Frank understood. Bill's own broad fingers could pick at least twice as much gold dust out of a poke as Frank's could.

"Better find yourself another claim," Bill said abruptly.

"No chance," said Frank.

Bill suddenly became angry. He pointed his own chair-leg forefinger at Frank's hands. "What you need," he roared, "is blood on them hands! That's it! Blood on the hands!"

He walked away.

Blood on his hands! Frank swirled the remains of his drink in his glass and drained it. Well, Bill was probably right. But even as he thought it, Frank recoiled from it.

A voice shouted in his ear: "Well, see who's here!"

Frank turned. It was Musset. With him were his two pals, Lang and Ketch. His flushed face showed that he was celebrating.

"The bottle!" he yelled at Bill. "Bring that bottle!"

Bill Ogden brought the bottle, set it down.

"Me and my pals took over a new claim today," he said. "You c'n join us in a drink to it!"

He set the bottle at Frank's elbow. Frank didn't look at it.

"I don't drink with thieves," Frank said coolly.

The grin on Musset's face died. His hand dropped on his gun.

Bill Ogden moved around the bar fast. He said gruffly: "No shootin' in my place."

Musset glanced up at Bill. He nodded slowly. Bill was boss here, and none would dispute him. Musset's hand left his gun. Frank knew what was coming next, and knew what he should do. He'd be beaten anyway, but he should go down fighting. But it sickened him. The mob at the bar had crowded around, eagerly waiting, watching for conflict, thirsty for blood. It was cruel and unjust and futile, and he hated it.

He knew what was coming, but he did nothing about it, just stood there, motionless, waiting.

Musset's hairy fist crashed full in his face. The back of his head cracked against the wall. He crumpled and went down.

THE blood that trickled down his throat gagged him, and his own choking woke him up. Powerful arms were carrying him. The arms were Bill Ogden's. It struck Frank that not only was Bill carrying him—he was holding him gently, with that tenderness of which only a big tough man is capable.

Frank said: "Thanks, Bill. I can walk."

Bill stopped in his tracks. "Sure?"

"Yes."

Carefully, Bill set him down.

Frank wobbled on his feet and Bill said: "You're hurt kinda bad, son. Lean on me."

Bill was taking him to his own cabin, about a hundred yards back of the bar room. It was here that Bill's daughter, Alicia, kept house for her father. Bill's wife had long since died, somewhere along the trail of his wanderings, and Alicia, now about eighteen, travelled with her father.

Alicia opened the door for them. She was tawny-haired and velvet-skinned, a wild beauty, with an abounding vitality in her full-figured person. She helped Frank to a rough couch, and there was quick pity in her eyes.

Frank mumbled: "Thanks. I'll be all right."

But he wasn't all right. He passed out again at once. There were broken ribs and twisted insides. It took him three weeks to recover. Alicia took care of him. Three weeks with nothing to do but watch Alicia. Alicia cooking. Alicia washing. Alicia dressing his hurts. Alicia walking about the room, or just sitting and talking to him.

Often he compared the vital beauty of Alicia with the cold and restrained young lady in Pennsylvania, to whom he had said goodbye.

And sometimes Frank caught Alicia looking at him questioningly, as if there were something she couldn't quite understand. No doubt Bill Ogden had told her what had happened back on the claim, and in the saloon. It would be hard for her to understand that.

To Alicia, all men were either brave or cowardly. And brave men fight!

The day came when Frank felt able to take care of himself.

Bill Ogden stared at him, hard. He said: "Well, son, are you ready for your job?"

Frank smiled. "My job! Have I got one?"

"If you still want it," Bill said. "It's like this. The other day I got into a game. The cards were good to me. I won a claim. I want to work that claim myself—the change will do me good. I'll be back in town every night, but you c'n run the bar all day."

ONCE again, Frank's mind travelled back to distant Pennsylvania. He wondered what his dignified father, his proud sweetheart, and his diletante friends, would think of this! Frank Henson, a bartender in a rowdy mining camp! The thought made him chuckle.

"I'll take the job," he told Bill, "but won't you lose money on it?"

Bill grinned. "You won't have to stick your dainty finger into anyone's poke," he said. "Old Jack Grubber will tend to that." Bill grew thoughtful for a moment. "Musset and his outfit ain't been around lately. They're playing the other bars in town. But better watch out for 'em. I hear they picked up a couple more scalawags for their gang—and that makes five of 'em."

Jack Grubber, Frank's helper in the saloon, was well fitted for the job. He was a short stubby man of fifty or more whose dirty-brown hair streaked across a low scarred forehead. Usually his ugly face beamed with a broad grin, but when something touched off his temper the grin vanished in an ominous scowl. And he had a reputation for speedy gun-work.

His thumb and forefinger were wider than Bill's, so that a customer would always pay plenty for his liquor.

For the most part, Frank met with no serious trouble. During the day, Jack Grubber's reputation with a gun was enough to hold unruly patrons in check. And at night Bill himself was there. Frank's main worry was the gold dust which was taken over the bar. This was dropped into a small earthen jar. Once a day the contents of this small jar were emptied into a larger jar.

It was this larger jar that held Bill Ogden's fortune. It now contained the taking of three months' brisk business, and there was as much dust in it as Bill could have got from the working of a good claim. This jar was always in the saloon, in Frank's care, in a corner behind the bar, concealed only by an old wooden box.

Bill's fervent ambition, Frank knew, was to get as much dust as quickly as he could, so that he could take Alicia down to distant San Francisco and establish her there in style.

It was after dusk one evening when Alicia opened the little door at the back of the saloon, peered in and motioned to Frank.

She looked worried. "Dad isn't back yet," she said.

"It's past his time," agreed Frank, "but he'll be along soon."

Alicia went back to the cabin. Frank himself was worried. Any little thing could have delayed Bill's return from his claim, yet Frank was harried by a queer foreboding.

It was a busy night. The oil lamps overhead flickered dimly over the roistering confusion.

Some time later Frank saw a broad powerful figure edge through the roaring crowd toward the bar.

It was Musset.

Musset grinned at Frank, and called for a drink. Frank placed the bottle and glass before him. Musset jerked open a cowhide pouch, and Jack Grubber thrust his thumb and forefinger into it for a healthy helping of dust.

Jack was scowling.

Frank watched, silently. He was uneasy. He watched every motion Musset made as he closed his poke and thrust it into his shirt. He watched him down his drink.

"Where's Bill?" inquired Musset, sociably.

Frank only shrugged.

He was conscious of something wrong; some little thing that he couldn't put his finger on. It wasn't just that Musset was acting friendly. It was something that had caught his eye yet hadn't quite registered in his mind.

Musset leaned his rump against the bar and glanced around casually. Then he grinned at Frank again, slipped away through the mob and vanished outside.

Jack Grubber muttered: "I don't like the looks of it."

"Neither do I," said Frank.

THE back door opened a little. It was Alicia again. Her eyes were afire with anxiety. "No sign of dad yet?" she whispered.

"He'll be along," said Frank.

"But he's hours past due," urged Alicia.

Frank motioned to Jack Grubber. When Jack joined them, Frank said: "What do you make of it, Bill not getting here?"

Jack was still scowling. "I don't like it," he said bluntly. "We ought to go after him."

"Where would you go? Bill never did tell us where he's panning."

Jack's eyes brightened. "There was a mean-looking mule of a man in here awhile ago, one of the two

new members of Musset's gang. He told me he seen Bill working this mornin'."

"Did he say where?"

"B'gum, he did! He said it was above Chestnut Gulch!"

"We'll go there!" Alicia said excitedly. "I'll go with one of you boys!"

"You don't need to go, ma'am," Jack said respectfully.

"Of course not," said Frank.

"I'm going!" Alicia said flatly.

"Wait!" Frank suddenly knew what he had seen, but not grasped, when Musset had been in. That pouch out of which Musset had paid for his drink was Bill Ogden's! But there was no use worrying Alicia, so he said quietly: "I don't think Bill is anywhere near Chestnut Gulch. I think we can find him somewhere near my old claim!"

"What makes you think so?" demanded Jack.

"Just a feeling."

"Then we'll go there," said Alicia. "Which of you will go with me?"

There was a pleading note in her voice. Frank knew she was hoping desperately that he would go.

"Jack is needed behind the bar," Frank said. "I'll go!"

He heard Alicia's gasp of relief. She wanted to believe in him—in his courage! They left at once, by way of the back door, and started up the road toward the crest.

Halfway up, Frank stopped abruptly.

"Perhaps, after all," he said, "it would be better if Jack went with you!"

Alicia stared at him in amazement. "You won't go?"

"I'll stay in the bar room."

Moonlight streaked from behind a cloud and heightened the pallor on Alicia's face. The high color of her lips faded and her eyes blazed. "You coward!" she said.

Frank turned and ran back to the saloon.

The patrons in Jack Ogden's bar room were thinning out, not over half a dozen left now. Jack Grubber had hurried after Alicia. Frank was back of the bar, staring moodily toward the door.

So he was a coward! The word stung his ears, tore at him. Of course, Alicia would think of that. He had refused to go after Bill, and she put it down to fear.

Well, he still didn't like to fight, but he had never felt so much like fighting as he did now. And he had a hunch that right now he belonged here in the saloon. That fellow who claimed he had seen Bill up above Chestnut Gulch must have had some reason for saying that. Perhaps it was a scheme to pull either he or Jack away from the saloon.

Down at the south end of the bar, just back of it, was a small ledge. Bill Ogden always kept a pistol there. Frank moved down that way and made sure it was still there.

The noisy commotion in the bar room suddenly ceased.

"There's shootin' down the road, boys," shouted someone.

The noise of shots had cut in on the pandemonium. Those present listened intently. Then there was a dash for the outside, everyone intent on getting a view of the battle.

Frank Henson was left alone.

But almost at once the doorway filled again. Musset came in. He was grinning broadly. At his heels came his two pals, Lang and Ketch. They bellied up to the bar.

Frank set up the bottle. They poured.

Lang, a slender fox-faced man,

said nervously: "Let's get this over with, Musset."

"Plenty time," Musset said comfortably. He held up his glass, drained it. He moved his head backwards and said to Frank: "That shootin' up the road will keep the boys all busy. We won't be interrupted."

Frank was still polite. "You staged that battle?"

"Sure. Two of our boys is puttin' it on. They're about a couple hundred yards away. One is on one side of the road and the other opposite. They're takin' shots at each other but aim to miss. That's just to keep the folks away from here."

Frank said calmly: "How about Bill Ogden? Have you killed him?"

Musset grinned. "Shot him. He got away, into the woods, but I guess he's dead by now."

"Let's do the job," put in Lang again. "We got to—"

"Plenty time." Musset poured another drink. He fixed his eyes on Frank. "I like to palaver with this lad. That claim Bill's been working was one he got from us on the turn of a card—it was the claim we took from you! He made a dicker with us not to mention it to anyone." Musset chuckled. "It suited us fine to keep quiet about it."

Frank had suspected as much. Frank couldn't hold that claim, but Bill could! And Bill was doing it for him! While Frank was running the saloon for Bill, Bill was operating the claim for Frank! Bill hadn't said so, but Frank knew it was so; he knew beyond a doubt that it was just the kind of thing Bill would do for a pal.

Lang, worried, said: "We been here five minutes already."

The other man, Ketch, a big brute, was getting nervous too. "Let's clean up and clear out," he said to Musset.

Musset stretched himself and pushed away from the bar. "Sure," he said. "Must be thirty thousand in dust in the jar back there! Maybe more. Hand it over, boy!"

Frank Henson smiled. "You must have made a mistake," he said pleasantly, and edged slowly along the bar. "I'm sure Bill would have told me if he wanted me to do that."

Musset's face clouded. He whipped out his gun, aimed it at Frank's chest.

He said: "Ketch, you go back there and git it!"

"I'd stay where you are, Ketch, if I were you," Frank said quietly.

Ketch laughed. The big man strode toward the end of the bar, where there was a passageway leading back of it. Foot by foot, Frank was moving toward the same spot, as if to meet him.

Musset roared at Frank: "You keep still!"

Frank made it to the end of the bar. His hand closed on the pistol on the shelf and he whirled it out. Ketch saw it and he looked surprised, then he swore angrily and reached for his own gun.

Frank fired. Lead tore through Ketch's wide belly. Ketch yelled in agony but before he went down his own gun flamed. The shot broke a bottle on the bar. Ketch was down now, and blood spouted over the tops of his jeans.

Musset was firing now. Wood splintered violently beyond Frank's head. Frank's blood was racing and there was no thought in his mind except to kill Musset and Lang. Nothing was real in the world except the gun in his hand and those two desperate men on the other side of the bar.

Even the gun felt different. When he had first picked it off the ledge it had seemed cold and heavy. Now it was warm and very light, almost no weight at all.

Frank dropped low. The bar had only the plank-top, no front piece, so it made almost no protection. But Frank fired under it, at Musset. But the shot tore at the tin lining in the far wall. A gun flamed at Frank from another angle—it was Lang this time—and ripped along his bent back, below the shoulder.

It hurt, that ripped back, but he paid no attention to it. The strange exhilaration which had come into him deadened all pain.

It was Musset's turn to shoot, and he was ready. Frank could see him crouched beyond the bar, focusing his eyes and his gun on Frank's head. But Frank perversely ignored Musset and aimed at the tall lank form which was Lang.

HIS lead caught Lang just under the chest, and Frank could almost see the bullet plow up into the man's heart. Lang teetered and tottered, tried to find support against the wall, but his fingers raked the boards as he went down.

But Musset had fired again. Frank's side was gushing blood now. Frank moved and was half concealed by the big barrel at the end of the bar. Musset was firing again. Frank threw a shot at him quickly and it took Musset at the end of the shoulder blade. Musset's gun arm swung around and then down, his fingers loosened and his gun dropped.

Frank flung his own gun away, staggered upright and started out toward Musset, his fists clenched.

Frank might have shot him, but he didn't. He didn't know why he was doing it this way. It was just a surging feeling that he had to meet this fellow face to face. Man to man. Give him blow for blow. It was a feeling that he had to slug at this man Musset, hard, furiously. Beat every atom of life out of him!

But Frank had no thought of how he was going to do it. There was not much left in him except a burning fury. His left arm was useless. Musset, too, had one arm out of commission, but the powerful miner was still solid on his feet, and he was waiting with his jaw out-thrust, madness blazing in his bloodshot eyes.

This is useless, Frank thought. This fellow is going to kill me! I'll be dead in about a minute! But he laughed, inwardly, and lunged forward, unsteadily. He saw Musset's huge fist hurtling toward his face and somehow he moved his head and the fist missed him.

There was Musset's bristly face, close to his own. Frank pecked his own right fist at that face. It landed, but it didn't do anything to Musset except madden him.

And there was Musset's face again, even closer, his red-streaked eyes afire. Musset had that deadly left fist poised again, ready to ram it with killing force against Frank's jaw. Frank saw it, watched it, helpless.

Then Frank's head dropped sideways. He didn't try to drop it; it just dropped from lack of support. Musset's paw shot past him. Musset himself pitched forward, stumbled and crashed against Frank's shoulder. They both toppled, back, and over, and skidded under the bar, together.

The force of their fall shoved them against the barrel under one end of the bar.

Frank was on top, mostly, but he knew that couldn't do him much good; weakness was seizing him. Musset was wobbly, too, but he was in better shape than Frank. And Musset had just seen the gun that Ketch had dropped. It was within reach. He was stretching out his hand to get it.

Frank glanced upwards. Just above his head was the bar. The wide heavy oak plank, fifteen feet long and nearly three wide, that made Bill Ogden's bar. Banging up against the barrel had almost dislodged that plank.

Musset's fingers were closing on the gun butt.

It took all that Frank had, but he forced himself up a little higher, clutched at the bar—then let himself fall back.

It was enough. The plank hesitated nervously on the brink of the barrel, then plunged over, and down. It cracked at Frank's shoulder and blanked out all the consciousness that was left in him.

But the bar had caught Musset full across the face. It crashed in his cheek bones, smashed his nose, buried his crushed head against the floor.

There was still a little desultory shooting down the road, but no one in Bill Ogden's bar room heard it.

IT MAY have been a day or two later. Frank smiled and said: "It seems to me, Bill, that every time I wake up I'm on your couch."

Big Bill Ogden shifted his position painfully on the box he was sitting on. "You're sure welcome to it, my boy." He grinned. "You did a great job of handling them vermin—crunched out the lot of 'em!"

"I was afraid they'd killed you," said Frank. "It made me mad."

"They almost got me," Bill said. "Took me unawares, got my guns afore I knowed it and then shot at me. Put my arm out of commission. My only chance was to make tracks for the woods, so I did. Lost my poke in the scramble. I was on my way back to town when Alicia and Jack found me." Bill stopped to look at Alicia as she brought in some steaming coffee, then went on: "Reckon Alicia and me will be headin' for San Francisco soon, thanks to you. Better come along, son. They tell me it's gittin' to be quite a town now."

"Thanks, Bill," said Frank. "But I must make a living. I—"

"You ain't so poor," Bill said. "That was your claim I was workin'. I allus figgered it that way. You ran the bar while I worked the claim—fair exchange. It done me good to get out that-away. I hid the dust from the claim, back in the hills. That was what made Musset and his outfit so mad—they couldn't find it. It's safe enough."

"You're too good to me," Frank said.

"Shucks," said Bill, "me and Alicia'd be proud to have you along. You ain't one that likes to fight, but you c'n sure do a great job of it when you git started. Only trouble with you is you ain't interested in fightin' enough to do any for yourself. You jest need someone else around to fight for, that's all!"

Frank laughed. He said: "But I haven't got anyone."

"Well, mebbe that could be arranged," grinned Bill.

He looked at Alicia. She was going about her work very quietly, and there was a high color in her cheeks.

Frank looked at her, too. And he knew that he would be going to San Francisco soon.

WRITTEN BY A DOCTOR IN PLAIN WORDS

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A NOOSE OF GOLDEN DOLLARS

by CARLETON CARR

The lynch mob was ready to blast the jail wide open, and Sheriff Matt Stevens had to decide fast. On one hand was his job, his girl, and perhaps his life. On the other was a drunken wastrel with the stain of murder on his hands!

FOR Sheriff Matt Stevens it had been one of those weeks when everything went wrong. First Julie had turned him down. It had taken him over a year to gather enough courage to propose to her, and when he did, her answer was the one he least expected. "I'm sorry, Matt," she had said. "I'm very fond of you, but I can't marry you. Every day I'd die a little till you came home at night. I watched my mother do, it Matt, and when they brought Dad home shot to pieces.... No, Matt. I couldn't go through that again."

Till then life and death had been simple things to Matt Stevens. Either you were alive, or you weren't. But when he walked home that night he came to understand what Julie meant

when she spoke of dying a little. Living without hope was a kind of death.

The next evening he had seen Julie riding beside his cousin, Malcolm Cleveland. They were riding very close together, and their laughter stirred a strange anger within Stevens.

He wanted to go to Julie and say: "If you won't have me, all right. There's lots of good men in this town to choose from. But not Malcolm Cleveland with his soft hands and his soft job and his soft smiling ways! Have you ever seen him when his belly was full of likker and his mouth was full of curses, when even the dance-hall girls who took his money looked at him with contempt?" But he couldn't say these things to Julie. He kept them inside him, and they boiled and filled him with their poison.

And yesterday Mayor Hornsby had called him into his office and said: "Looks like we'll have to hold an election for your office, Matt. Some of the people claim that another man ought to have a chance, too."

Matt hadn't said anything to that. He knew that "some of the people" meant Bill English, the friends he won by giving them free drinks, and The Herald, whose purse-strings English controlled.

There had been an editorial in The Herald today. It said that Matt Stevens had been a very good sheriff —not outstanding, there was the incident of the rustling he hadn't been able to stop, but all in all quite a good sheriff. Then it had gone on to say that there were several men possibly just as well suited for the job. And since he was paid from public funds, it would be just to allow another man a chance at office.

The thought of losing his star was about all that Matt Stevens could take. As far back as he could remember he had wanted to be a lawman. The day when he pinned a deputy's badge onto his vest had been the happiest in his life. He had never stopped to think what he would do when he no longer rodded the law. To stop breathing would be easier for him.

His fingers clenched and unclenched at his sides while he walked through the darkness. They hardened into fists as though he wanted to strike out at something with all his strength. It was at that moment he heard the shot in Bill English's Four Aces saloon. He strode swiftly forward, slamming the batwings aside.

THE first thing he saw was the wounded cowpoke. The man's face was white with pain. His fingers were tightly pressed against his shoulder. Blood seeped between them and dripped to the floor. The next thing Matt Stevens saw was Bill English's mocking smile. "Self-defense, Sheriff," he said. "He went for his cutter first. Right, boys?"

The men beside the saloon keeper nodded. Matt Stevens paid no attention to them. His gaze was fastened to the roulette wheel and the table with the numbered squares. Very deliberately he yanked the wheel from its axle and smashed it in half over his uplifted knee. He dropped the pieces to the floor.

The silence that followed was electric. Men drew back as English and the sheriff faced each other. The sheriff was calm, the saloon man was rigid with fury. "Go for your gun!" he said. "I'm asking you. Go for your gun!"

Stevens shook his head. "I don't want to kill you, English," he said. "I'm just telling you that there'll be

no gambling in this town so long as I'm paid to keep the law." He turned to go.

"You yellow—!"

Matt Stevens turned and swung all in one motion. All the bitterness and anger that had been inside of him surged through his back and shoulder and arm, and exploded on the point of English's jaw. The saloon man's eyes glazed. He sank very limply to the floor.

Matt Stevens felt better than he had felt for weeks as he walked toward his hotel room. Some of the turmoil within him had quieted when his fist connected with English's jaw, and he was no longer worried what sort of a campaign The Herald would carry against him. He had a lot of friends, and the thought of an election no longer troubled him. He was whistling quietly toward the stars and he almost failed to see the body sprawled at the steps of the bank.

It was Pete, the Mex night watchman. The pool of blood beneath his head told Stevens that the man was dead even before he saw the knife buried almost to the hilt in the man's neck. He knelt down for a moment to feel for his pulse and make sure, then he straightened to his feet at the sound behind him.

It was the door, swaying softly in the quiet night wind. Matt Stevens went inside the bank. He stumbled, lit a match and searched for a lamp. He lit the lamp with swift fingers and hurried to the rear where the safe was kept. It was open and empty.

With the lamp in his hand, he went outside again. From the angle of the knife he could tell that the blow had been struck from behind. He shuddered slightly as he removed the steel. When the light from the lamp fell upon it, he dropped it as though it burned his hands. Letters were engraved on the pearl handle and the letters spelled Malcolm Cleveland.

Cleveland was the bank cashier. He probably knew the combination of the safe. The knife was his. It meant a hang rope for Cleveland; it meant.... Matt Stevens tried to check the thought that came to him unbidden. But there was no holding it back. It meant that with his cousin out of the way, perhaps Julie would....

Footsteps sounded behind him. He saw the glint of steel and he heard a harsh voice ask: "What's going on?"

MATT STEVENS rose to his feet. "It's me, English," he said. "Someone's knifed old Pete and robbed the safe."

"Robbed the safe!" English gasped. "My God! I had almost ten thousand in there!"

The sheriff nodded. "Every one in town's going to suffer," he said. "It's going to be hell this winter, unless—" He broke off, wanting to think before he told what he already knew. "Better go wake up Taylor. He ought to know about this."

But the banker was almost beside him. His gaunt face looked wild in the flickering lamplight; his glance moved swiftly from the limp form on the ground, to the door of the bank, to Sheriff Matt Stevens. "I heard a shot," he said. "Then I saw the lamp. What happened?"

"Murder," Stevens told him. "And robbery. They got everything."

The banker's lips opened and shut many times without sound. "Who?" he said finally. "How?" And then he added as an after-thought: "I'm ruined!"

Stevens lowered the lamp so that

its wavering light fell on the knife in the dust. "That knife," he said, "belongs to my cousin, Malcolm Cleveland. I'm going to search his house.

There was silence for a moment. "I can't believe it," the banker said. "I trusted that boy!"

"Lead the way," English said to Stevens. There was grim satisfaction in his voice. "You're the sheriff."

The entire length of the main street was in darkness now. The only sound was the soft susurrous of three pairs of boots in the dust. Tomorrow it would be different, Stevens reflected. Tomorrow it would be hell.

The two-room shack where Cleveland lived was on the outskirts of town. Stevens hurried, even though he didn't expect to find anything there. By now, he figured, his cousin would be very long gone. There was no answer when he pushed open the door with his gun barrel and called his cousin's name.

English lit a match and Stevens saw the body on the floor in its brief light before it went out. Then English found the lamp.

Cleveland was sprawled on his face. An over-turned chair was by his head. By his right hand was a flat whisky bottle with a little amber liquid showing in the bottom. A sheaf of bills with the wrapper on them was by his left hand.

Stevens knelt down swiftly and turned him over. He was alive. There was a dark purple lump over his right eye. While the sheriff lifted him to a sitting position and tried to bring him back to consciousness, the banker rushed wildly about the two rooms, searching into every possible hiding place. "Where's my money," he demanded. "There's only a thousand here! Where's the rest of my money?"

English didn't say anything. He was watching Stevens like a hawk.

Cleveland began to stir, then his eyes opened. He looked around him without seeming to see anything. His hand lifted to his head and his eyes closed for a moment with pain.

"Where's my money?" the banker screamed at him.

"Money?" Cleveland echoed. "What money?"

"The money you stole after you killed old Pete," English said. "The money you hid before you drank yourself stupid."

"Killed old Pete!" Cleveland said. "Me?" He looked at Matt Stevens. "What is this?" he said.

"Come on," said Stevens, lifting him to his feet. "Maybe in the morning you'll remember."

AFTER Matt Stevens had led Cleveland into one of the jail cells in back of his office and turned the key in the iron gate, a curious feeling of depression took hold of him.

"Take good care of him, Sheriff," English taunted. "See that he doesn't get away."

Stevens whirled. "Look here, English," he said. "You've reminded often enough tonight that I'm sheriff. Now I'm telling you this: As long as I'm wearing this badge, I'm responsible to no one but the town council. Now get the hell out before I throw you out!"

For a moment English stood motionless, speechless. Then he said: "Just make sure that money is found." He turned and strode angrily from the office. Side by side with Taylor, he clomped angrily down the boardwalk.

The sky was turning grey, yet Stevens felt no sleepiness. His mind was working doggedly to piece to-

gether the parts of the night's murder picture. Cleveland had been drinking to build the courage for his act. When almost the entire town was asleep, he approached old Pete, caught him off guard and stabbed him. Then he went into the bank, opened the safe, and took the money. After that, he hid the bulk of it somewhere outside of town and returned to his shack to pick up enough clothes for flight. But apparently he had drank too much and fallen and knocked himself out against the heavy chair. The picture was clear. All the pieces fit.

"You might as well tell me where you hid that money," Stevens said. "It might make things just a little easier for you."

"I don't know anything about it," Cleveland said. "All I know is that someone knocked at the door and woke me up. I opened it and something hit me on the head. That's all I know."

"It was your knife that killed the watchman," said Stevens.

Cleveland's hand moved swiftly to his vest pocket. His face went ugly with fear. "My God!" he gasped. "It's gone!"

Stevens nodded. "You might as well confess," he said.

"But I can't confess! There's nothing to confess to. I didn't do it!" Cleveland exclaimed.

"There was the money we found beside you," Stevens continued. "Where would you get that much money?"

Cleveland didn't answer. He began to pace back and forth in his narrow cell. From time to time he would stop in front of the barred window and look into the street. Then he would turn away and start his pacing again. "What's going to happen to me, Matt?" he asked.

"You'll have a trial," Stevens said, "and you'll probably be found guilty. I guess they'll hang you after that."

Malcolm Cleveland stood alone—still for a very long time after he heard the sheriff's words. Then with a sob, he flung himself face down on his cot.

Stevens rolled one cigarette after another, continued his questioning. The grey of the sky became tinged with blue; footsteps and voices sounded outside. Cleveland made only one answer: "I didn't do it." The sound of voices outside grew like a rising wind in a pine thicket. Stevens went to the window. A large crowd had collected before the bank and Taylor was speaking to them. Then he stopped speaking and the crowd turned and came toward the office. Taylor and Bill English were leading them.

ENGLISH strode up the steps and through the door.

"Well?" asked Stevens.

"We want Cleveland," English said.

"You just go back and tell those boys that Cleveland is my prisoner," Stevens said.

For a moment English hesitated, then he turned and walked back to the crowd. There was some excited talking. The crowd surged forward.

Stevens removed both guns and held them ready. "Better stop right there, English," he said.

English took another step forward and Stevens' finger tightened on the trigger. The slug fountained the dust inches away from English's foot. Stevens lifted his gun muzzle slightly.

"Better stop there," he repeated softly.

English stopped.

"I know how you men feel about losing that money," Stevens said, "but we're not having any lynching.

Cleveland is entitled to a trial and he's getting it." He turned his back on the crowd and went back to his office thinking that Bill English was just a bit too anxious to start trouble.

He figured, too, that no matter how this thing ended, he was finished as a sheriff. The robbing of the bank meant that all the people would suffer; that many would not be able to last through the winter unless they sold their homes, their ranches, their stores. It was easy for Matt Stevens to understand their fear and their hatred. He understood their wanting to lynch the man who had plunged them into this predicament. They wanted a scapegoat, and if he stood against their wishes, he would suffer.

There was only one way out—to persuade Cleveland to tell where the money was hidden. Stevens knew it was hopeless; knew that even with the rope tightening around his neck, his cousin would maintain a stubborn silence.

It was then, while Sheriff Matt Stevens sat pondering the fix he was in that temptation came to him. It came whispering in his ear with the voice of reason, and he listened to its words. Why not let the mob take Cleveland. He was guilty, there was no doubt of that. With Cleveland out of the way, Julie....

Stevens rose to his feet violently, turning away as from a physical presence. He pressed his hands against his ears, but the voice continued. If they tried to get Cleveland there would be shooting and innocent men would die. But Matt Stevens knew deep inside him that he wasn't thinking of others. He was thinking about the job that was his life. He was thinking about Julie.

The voice continued whispering and sweat broke out on his body as he struggled to stop it. Outside the crowd was muttering louder and louder and soon he would have to decide.

Stevens knew that he could take the easy way out, the way that would suit his purposes, and no one would ever blame him. No one but himself. Suddenly his muscles stiffened and he stood fixed, like a bird dog that has scented game. Suddenly he realized that he had been so glad that Cleveland's neck was in a noose, he hadn't stopped to consider that his cousin might be innocent.

HIS mind went backward to the moment when they had found Cleveland lying senseless on the floor of his shack. Even then Stevens had sensed that something was wrong in the picture, but he hadn't allowed it to come to the forefront of his mind. The bed had been in violent disorder. That didn't fit in, for Malcolm Cleveland was fastidious as an old maid. He never left the shack in the morning without washing the dishes, sweeping the floor and making the bed. Maybe what his cousin claimed was true. Maybe someone had awakened him in the middle of the night and knocked him out!

Then there was the whisky bottle. Malcolm Cleveland never drank anything but brandy. "Rotgut," he used to say about whisky. "Brandy is the gentleman's drink!"

Now there was doubt in Stevens' mind. There was no answer to the many questions that troubled him. There was very little time. He kept thinking of Julie, thinking of her so intensely that he wasn't surprised when he looked up and saw her standing before him.

"Matt!" she said. "Oh, Matt. This is awful!"

He nodded, noting her pallor, her fear-widened eyes.

"They're planning to lynch him," she said. "I heard English persuading the others."

"I know!" Stevens said.

"Matt, you won't let them!" the girl said. "You've got to stop them!"

Stevens didn't answer. Stopping them would be like trying to stop an avalanche. After the first shot was fired the hatred the crowd felt against Cleveland would turn against him too. It would be hell, and a lot of good men would die. Stevens realized that this was the starting point of his argument. He was getting nowhere. "Better get out of here quick," he told Julie. "There's going to be trouble soon."

Julie left. The last look she gave Matt Stevens was one of bitter disappointment.

Stevens sat back and tried to figure how much he owed to Julie now, after the events of last week. And then it came to him that this had nothing to do with Julie, nor Cleveland . . . nor himself. It was a question that involved only a Lawman and the Law. Innocent or guilty, the prisoner was entitled to a trial—that was the Law. And no matter what his own personal desires said, no matter how many lives it might cost, it was up to the sheriff to prevent a lynching.

The thought sank like a wedge in Matt Stevens' mind, and he knew exactly what he had to do. The question now was only if he had the time to do it. The noise outside had swelled to a sudden roar.

He walked to the barred gate of the cell and twisted the heavy key in the lock. "I'm going to turn you loose, Mal," he said.

Cleveland stared at him blankly. "You'll have to change clothes with me," Stevens said. "If you reach my horse in time, you might make it."

"And you?" Cleveland asked. "What about you?"

"Don't worry about me," Stevens said. "You'll have yourself to take care of. There's going to be a lot of commotion when they find out you got away, and I'll slip through it somehow." Stevens had peeled his shirt off even before he finished speaking. Outside the crowd was suddenly quiet. The stillness was more ominous than the noise had been. "Hurry!" Stevens said.

Cleveland was wearing the lawman's clothes now. He yanked his hat brim down over his face. "There's horses out in front," Stevens said. "Get on the Morgan without speaking to anyone. Then give her the spurs and go like hell."

Cleveland turned at the door. "I don't know how to thank you, Matt," he said.

"Don't thank me," the lawman said. "Julie—be good to her."

"Julie?"

"Go on," said Stevens. "Now!"

For a moment there was silence, then there was a startled gasp. Then a shot crashed. The pounding of hoofs sounded above the echoes. More shots followed.

The street before his office was empty, but all the horses had been taken from his hitch rail. He went outside, keeping to the thin shadows of the building. A knot of men was in the far end of the street. They were all facing in the direction that Cleveland and his pursuers had gone. A cloud of dust drifted into the sky about a mile away, and far behind it, another, larger one.

Stevens ran swiftly in the opposite

direction, toward the Mercantile, where some broncs were hitched. He had almost reached them when a cry went up behind him: "There he is!" Then a shot sounded and lead swished over his head. For a moment his impulse was to turn and fire back. Instead he doubled over and quickened his pace. He grabbed the reins of one horse, loosened the other broncs and whipped them away. He vaulted into the saddle and dug in the spurs. A volley of shots crashed out. One of the horses screamed, stumbled to its knees and then crashed forward.

Mighty bad shooting, the sheriff mused grimly. But the worst shots were often the most lucky ones. He bent down over his mount's neck and urged his bronc with his voice and with his heels.

In a few moments he had ridden out of gun-range, out of the town he loved, the job he loved, and away from the woman he had hoped to make his wife. With him he was taking the curses of the men he had robbed of vengeance; behind him he left hatred. But he had done his job. . . .

THE miles between him and Brant's Gulch grew, and with the passing of time, doubt once more began to grow in Matt Stevens' mind. Had he done his job? It was his job to see that a man was not lynched by the law of the mob, but was it right to allow a prisoner to escape before he stood trial? Suppose Cleveland was guilty?

Stevens wanted to shrug the whole mess away and forget about it, but he knew that he would never have a moment's rest until he had gone to the very bottom of this thing and proven Cleveland innocent or guilty. If he was guilty, somehow, somewhere he would find him and bring him back to trial. If he was innocent, he would track down old Pete's killer though it took him a lifetime.

The dust and his own bitterness had brought the taste of gall to the lawman's lips, and he sighed with satisfaction when he topped a rise and looked down upon the buildings of Silverton. First he would have a drink, then he would start making inquiries. If any strangers had come to town within the past 24 hours, he would trace them down and question them. He would learn if anyone was spending more money than he had a right to spend.

As Stevens pushed through the batwings of the saloon, he realized how small his chances were of tracking down a killer whose identity he didn't know; who might exist only in his own imagination. He had just breasted the mahogany when he realized that he didn't have any of his money; that whatever cash he had was in the pocket of the coat he had given to Cleveland. Swiftly his hand moved to the pocket of the coat he was wearing. There was the feel of paper in his hand, and he drew it forth anxiously and looked at it.

"Whisky," he told the barkeep, "and water. A big glass." The paper he had drawn forth was a small manila pay envelope, still unopened. Stevens carefully ripped off the top and threw a yellowback on to the bar.

The barkeep looked at him, then picked up the bill. He bent down beneath the counter. When he straightened again, a sawed-off shotgun was in his hands.

"Git 'em up, Mister!" he snarled.

Stevens looked at the gun and at the man who was holding it. Both of them looked deadly. He lifted

his hands. "What's the matter?" he asked.

When the barkeep spoke, it was to the other men in the room he addressed his words, not Stevens. "Another one of them damned counterfeiters!" he said. "This one's going to live to hang."

Counterfeit! Stevens' hand moved downward to pick up the bill. The barkeep thrust the gun forward. "Watch it!" he snarled.

"Look," said Stevens, "this is a mistake. I'm the sheriff of Brant's Gulch."

"And I'm the Queen of the May," sneered the barkeep, "and passing crooked money's still a hanging offense. Come on, git moving. I'm taking you to the sheriff right now." He picked up the yellowback and came from around the bar. "Gunther'll be mighty glad to see you," he said, prodding Stevens with the gun barrel.

At the mention of Gunther's name, the anxiety inside the lawman vanished. Gunther knew who he was. But suppose he had been a total stranger in Silverton; suppose he hadn't been a lawman? With the fake money on him, he'd become gallows' meat—even though he had been innocent. Just as Cleveland might have been innocent! For the first time in his career as a lawman, Matt Stevens fully realized what a dangerous thing circumstantial evidence was!

The barkeep prodded him. "That building on the left," he said.

SHERIFF Clem Gunther was sitting on his steps. The sun was in his eyes, and he squinted them narrowly to look at the men who were approaching.

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

"Stevens!" he shouted finally, leaping to his feet. "Why you old sheep-stealing lobo!"

"Counterfeiter," Stevens said dryly. "This gent with the shotgun's got me by the short hairs. Says I ought to hang."

"He tried to slip me a bum ten," the barkeep said. "I spotted it right away. Lucky for him he didn't go for his gun, or he'd a got what the other one got!"

Clem Gunther's eyes narrowed as he looked at the yellowback the barkeep held out to him. "Fake, all right," he said. He turned to the barkeep. "It's all right, Pat," he said. "I'll handle this." After the man had left, the lawman of Silverton looked at Stevens intently. Matt could see that he was noticing the absence of his badge, was wondering about the town clothes he wore.

"I'm hunting something, Gunther," he said. "There's robbery in it, and murder. Now it seems that counterfeiting's involved, too. You've got to tell me what you know."

Silverton's lawdog looked at him for a long time. It was impossible for Matt to tell what Gunther was thinking. His eyes were expressionless. "Ain't much to tell," he said. "A jasper came into Pat's saloon this morning and asked for a drink. Pat saw that his money was fake and he asked him to elevate, using his shotgun as a persuader. The jasper went for his wolf, instead, and Pat shot him."

"Dead?" Stevens asked anxiously.

"Very," said Gunther dryly. "Both parts of 'im."

Disappointment struck Stevens like a heavy fist to the heart. "Is that all?" he said. "Didn't you find out anything?"

Gunther considered for a long time before he spoke. He watched Stevens carefully to notice his reaction to the words. "Yes," he said. "I went through his saddle bags. I found some more of that money. A hundred and twenty-six thousand dollars worth, to be exact. I'm holding it till the government men get here."

Stevens leaped to his feet. "You've got to give me that money!" he said. "I'll need it for twenty-four hours."

"That's a lot of money, Stevens," Gunther said.

"There's a lot at stake," Stevens answered. "Last night a man was murdered in Brant's Gulch, and the bank was robbed. That crooken ten I gave the barkeep came out of the cashier's pocket. Somehow, it all ties in. Maybe that money will trap the killer!"

Gunther considered for a long time. "Maybe it will," he said finally. "Maybe it will." He rose to his feet and went into his office. A few moments later he returned carrying a small satchel. "Here it is, Stevens," he said. "Maybe it'll make a noose of golden dollars for someone." He handed the satchel over. "Take good care of it," he said. . . .

STEVENS forgot that he was thirsty and hungry and tired. He forgot that he had already ridden thirty miles that day under a merciless sun. He thought of nothing but the fact that before the day was over, he would know for sure who was responsible for the murder of old Pete, and who had committed the robbery.

He had a fresh mount under him, and a good one, and he reached Brant's Gulch before dark. The first place he went was to Bill English's

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(Continued From Page 103)

Four Aces. English met him at the door, with a curse and a levelled .45.

"You're through, Stevens," he said. "You're lucky if you don't hang for what you did."

"Put that gun away," said Stevens, "and come with me pronto."

English lowered the gun but he didn't put it away. "Where to?" he asked.

"We're going to visit Mr. Taylor," Stevens said. "Reckon he's at home?"

"I doubt it," English answered. "Said that he was going to visit his sister in Abilene for a spell, and was riding into Larido to meet the midnight stage."

"Come on!" said Stevens. "Hurry."

The urgency of his words overcame the saloon owner's hesitancy. "All right," he said. "Let's go."

The banker hadn't left yet. There was a half-packed suitcase on his bed, and he was cramming shirts and socks into it from a bureau drawer. He wheeled when the door opened. "You!" he said.

Stevens nodded. "How much money was stolen last night?" he asked.

"All of it," the banker answered. "The dirty crook got every last cent! And you let him go. You're going to be sorry for that yet, Stevens!"

"You haven't answered my question," Stevens said. "I asked you how much."

The banker pursed his lips. "Close to a hundred and thirty thousand," he said.

"Good. That means I've got almost all of it back!"

"You've got it back!" English exclaimed. "Where?"

"Right here," said Stevens, pointing to the satchel in his left hand."

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 104)

"Cleveland confessed?" asked English. "Or did you follow him to where he hid it?"

"Cleveland had nothing to do with it," Stevens answered.

"I don't know about that," said English. "Cleveland was the only one who had the combination to the safe. This looks mighty queer to me."

"Me, too," said Stevens.

The banker held out his hand. "Thanks for bringing the money back," he said. "I'm sure the people will appreciate it a lot."

"I'm sure they will," said Stevens, ignoring the fingers that the banker had held out to take the satchel. "As a matter of fact, I was just thinking that they'll be so glad to learn their money is safe, they'd probably like to have it right in their hands tonight. I think I'll call a meeting in the school house right now, and return their money to all those that have their bank books with them."

Taylor laughed. "A nice idea," he agreed, "but don't you think it's a bit unnecessary? I'll put it in the safe and you can tell everyone it's there. After all, that's all that really matters." He held out his hand once more.

"Just the same, I think they'd like to feel the cash," said Stevens. "How much do you have coming to you, English?" The lawman put the satchel on the bed and bent over it to open the clasp.

"I'll take that bag, Stevens," Taylor said. There was a pearl-handled .38 in his hand to back up his order.

"You might have got away with it, Taylor," Stevens said. "If you hadn't

(Continued On Page 108)

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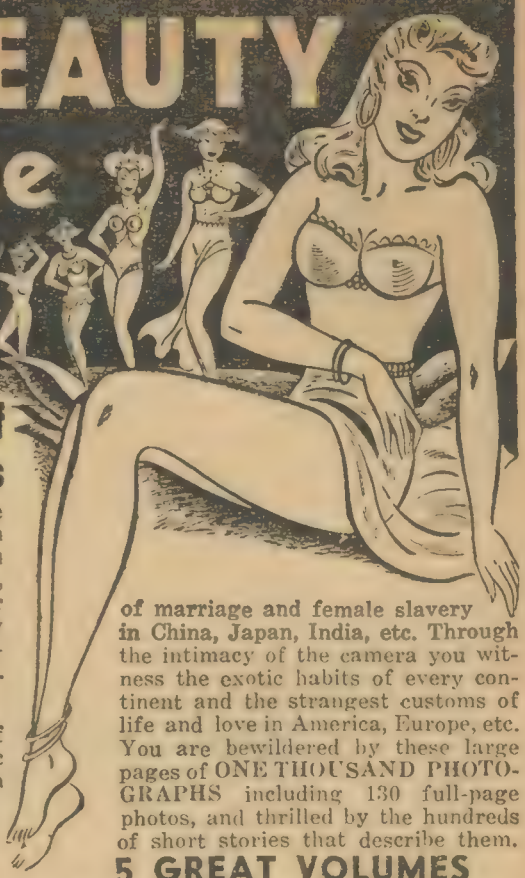

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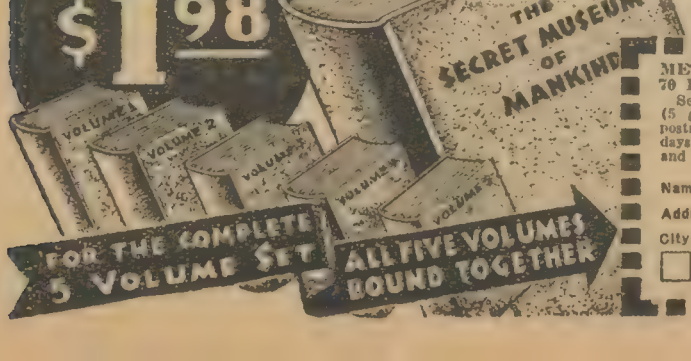

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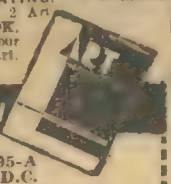

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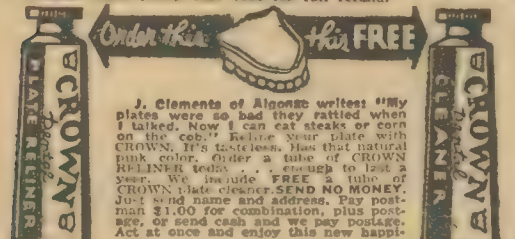

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(Continued From Page 106)

been so stingy you payed Cleveland's salary in counterfeit."

"Counterfeit" English echoed.

"Sure," said Matt Stevens. "He had some one rob his own bank—probably promising a big cut of it. But he was so almighty miserly that he couldn't stand the idea of sharing, so he made up some fake money. The jasper who killed old Pete and robbed the safe, framing Cleveland so he'd look guilty, double-crossed Taylor and kept going. But he didn't know the money was fake." Stevens stopped and faced the lawman. "You should have payed Cleveland in real money, Taylor. Thirty measly bucks, and you'd have been in the clear."

THERE was a thin smile on the banker's lips. He reached across the bed with his left hand and picked up the satchel. He crammed it into the suitcase and began to close the larger bag. At that moment English went for his gun.

Taylor fired two quick shots, his face tightening spasmodically each time he pulled the trigger. The saloon keeper was slammed backward against the wall. The gun in his hand slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor. He leaned limply against the wall, began to slide slowly down.

The banker turned to Stevens, triggered once. Steven's shot answered him, tore through his left arm. The lawman's gun clicked with a dull dead sound and the banker grinned triumphantly. His gun lifted from Stevens' heart and came to rest pointing directly between his eyes. Silence held the room, broken only by the banker's harsh breathing and the ghosts of gunthunder that still whispered against the walls. The silence exploded into roaring sound.

(Continued On Page 110)

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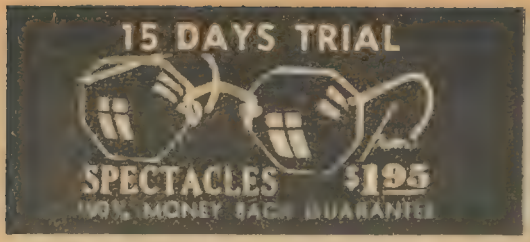

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(Continued From Page 108)

Taylor stared without sight into space. Blood from a hole over his left eye slowly spread over his face. He crashed stiffly forward as though made of wood. Stevens turned.

"I figgered all that money was bound to make trouble," said Sheriff Gunther. "It always has, and it always will. What I didn't know was which side of the fence you'd be on. I followed you to find out."

Stevens nodded, turned to help English. But the saloon man didn't need much help. He was rising to his feet unaided. "I guess we've got the sheriff we need," he said. "I guess we won't be holding any election."

They found the money in the bottom of Taylor's suitcase. "What's this!" Gunther gasped. "More counterfeit?"

Stevens shook his head. "No," he said. "That's the real stuff. Careful you don't get it mixed up with the other. Better bring it to the bank right now." Suddenly he felt very tired.

After the money was locked up, they poured kerosene over the counterfeit, and touched a match to it. A crowd collected and Stevens told them that their money was safe, that it had never been stolen. He told them that Taylor had hired a killer to steal the fake money, and then had framed Cleveland. Then English came forward and began to praise him. Stevens slipped into the shadows and went away. He wanted to be where it was quiet and dark so he could forget the furious turmoil he'd been through. He felt a touch on his arm and he heard Julie whisper his name.

"Matt," she said. "Matt, I'm so glad."

(Continued On Page 112)

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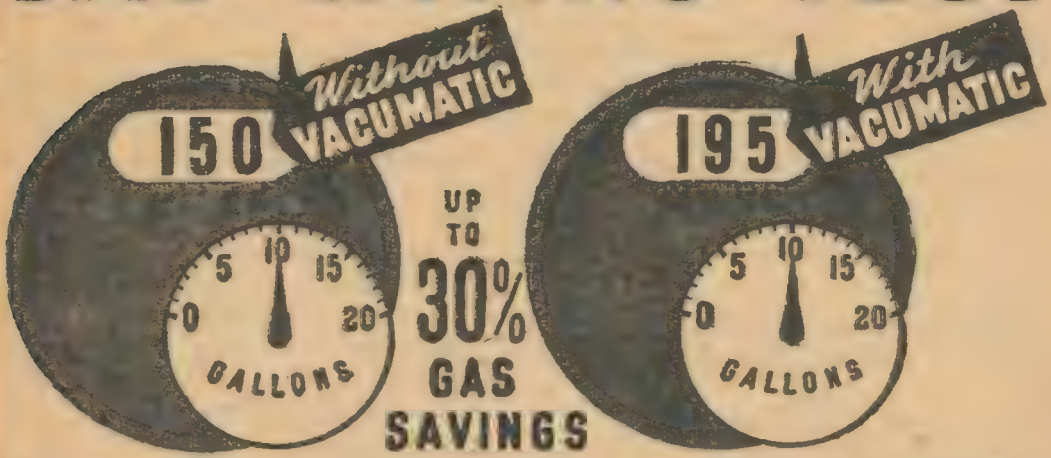

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(Continued From Page 110)

Stevens nodded. "He's clear now," he said. "When he writes to you, tell him it's all right to come back."

Julie smiled at him strangely. "It's you I'm thinking of," she said. "It's always been you. I wanted you to do your job the way....the way that you did it."

Stevens remained silent. There was a curious meaning to her words that he couldn't quite grasp.

"I guess a person has to do the job they're cut out for, Matt," she said. "There can't be any running away from it. I learned that today, Matt, and I guess I learned I was cut out to be a lawman's wife."

There was no doubt what her words meant now. He turned to her. Starlight was in her eyes, her lips were parted.

"Julie," he whispered.

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Why marriages fail—wife often frustrated, disappointed—husband should improve in sexual relations —set routine grows boresome — case of the under-sexed wife — how to keep love alive.

Chapter 3—Scientific Sex Program in Marriage
Marriage based on mutual love and co-operation—instructions for performing and following marriage sex program—chart of safe periods —normal frequency of relations.

Chapter 4—Functions of Organs
The purpose of sex—how conception takes place — secondary stimuli zones — attaining highest pitch in compatibility.

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The importance of preparation—first act the courtship or love-making—second part of the Coitus—many positions possible—final act or climax—half hour all too short for courtship—develop mutual sexual rhythm—reaching a climax together—women often unsatisfied — problems of physical mismatching—overcoming difficulties.

Chapter 6—Secrets of Sex Appeal
What does a man notice—how to dress for charm and appeal—choosing clothing, attending to complexion, figure and personality.

Chapter 7—Dangers of Petting
Is it wise to pet to be popular?—Embracing bodies and kissing lips dangerous?—yearning desires difficult to control.

Chapter 8—How to produce ideal conditions for marital relations in your home.

Chapter 9—Birth Control
A moral issue long debated—arguments in favor and against limitation of children—mechanical contrivances against law—various methods used — no method ideal.

Chapter 10—Mistaken ideas on [illegible]

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Science investigating various theories—no certain methods.

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Chapter 18—Intimate Questions of Wives
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